THE WHELPS OF THE WOLF

GEORGE MARSH

Frank E. Schoonover

THE WHELPS OF THE WOLF

A wonderful story of the Northland by a man who has lived in that country and knows it well, who loves the out of doors, has felt the winter's cold with its ice and snow, has dwelt with the people and understands them. An athlete of note who rowed on the Varsity crew for Yale, who voyaged with a Cree Indian 1500 miles by canoe from the headwaters of the great Albany River, a lover of dogs who can write a tender love story, dramatic, swift, stirring-- a true picture of the Hudsons' Bay Country and its people.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

TOILERS OF THE TRAIL

ILLUSTRATED BY

FRANK E. SCHOONOVER

Boxed. Price, $2.50 net

BOOK
MARK

TEMPLE BAILEY'S BOOKS

The Gay Cockade	$2.00
The Trumpeter Swan	2.00
The Tin Soldier	1.75
Glory of Youth	1.75
Contrary Mary	1.75
Mistress Anne	1.75

At all bookstores

THE PENN PUBLISHING COMPANY
PHILADELPHIA

PATENTED NOV. 22-1921

48187

£150—

1922
1st

utR

> inscribed by author
2ND novel
scarce in dj

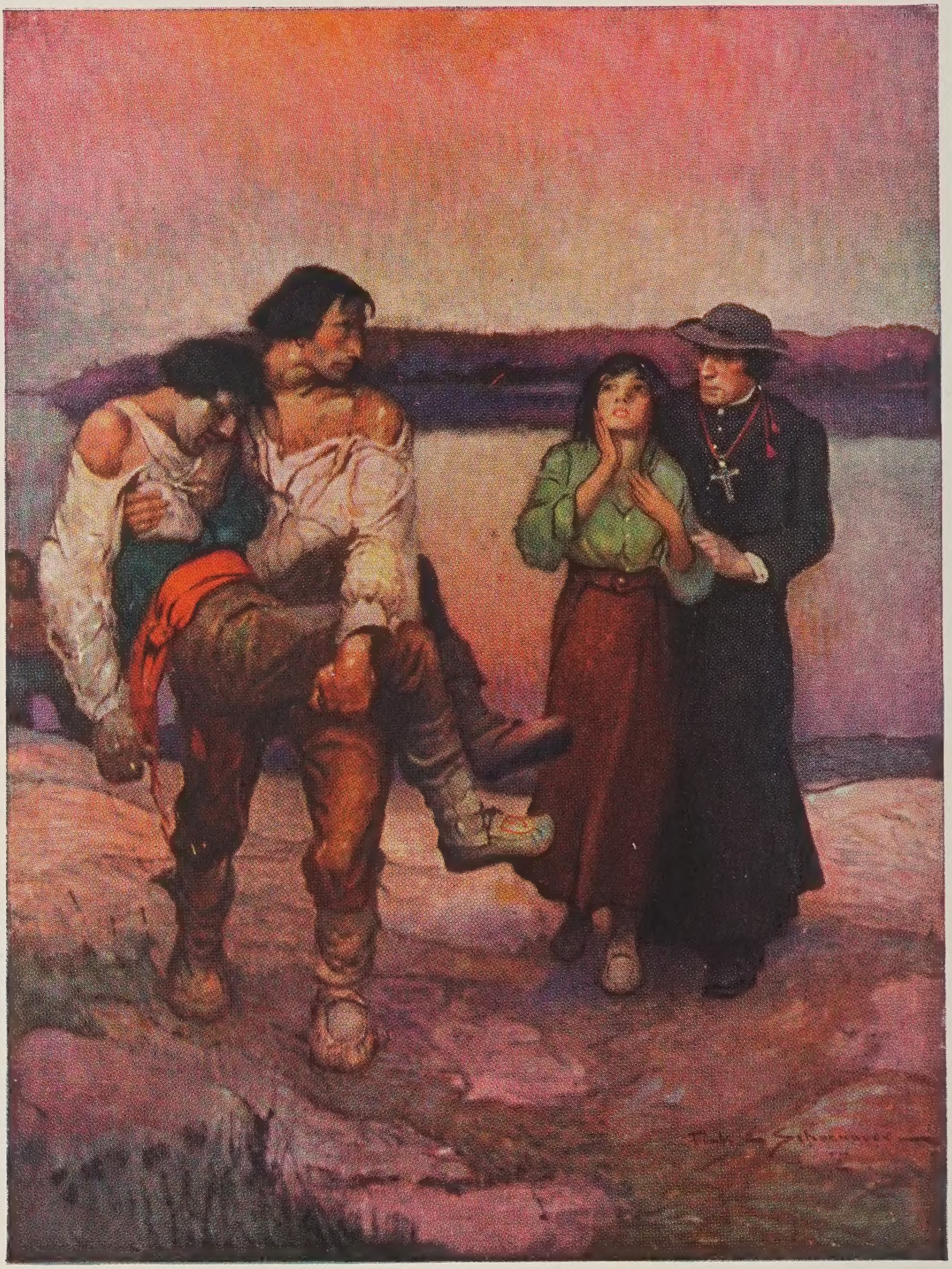
Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2024 with funding from
University of Toronto

https://archive.org/details/centre00mcki

To

Walter Cox, Esq.,

George Marsh



SUPPORTING THE SOBBING GIRL, PERE BRETON ORDERED: "CARRY HIM TO THE MISSION, JULES."

The Whelps of the Wolf

By

GEORGE MARSH

Author of "Toilers of the Trails"

Frontispiece by
FRANK E. SCHOONOVER

THE PENN PUBLISHING
COMPANY PHILADELPHIA
1922

COPYRIGHT
1922 BY
THE PENN
PUBLISHING
COMPANY

The Whelps of the Wolf

Made in the U. S. of A.

Contents

I. The Land of the Windigo . . . 9
II. The End of the Trail 16
III. The Friend of Demons . . . 30
IV. Home and Julie Breton . . . 38
V. The Moon of Flowers 44
VI. For Love of a Dog 51
VII. The Long Trail to the South Coast . 64
VIII. The Meeting in the Marshes . . 69
IX. In the Teeth of the Winds . . 79
X. The Camp on the Ghost . . . 88
XI. The Warning in the Wind . . . 94
XII. The Work of the White Wolves . 98
XIII. Poor Fleur 103
XIV. The Mark of the Breed . . . 108
XV. For Love of a Man 111
XVI. The Starving Moon 119
XVII. The Turn of the Tide 131
XVIII. Spring and Fleur 135
XIX. When the Ice Goes Soft . . . 145
XX. The Dead Man Tells His Tale . . 150
XXI. The Blind Clutch of Circumstance . 157
XXII. In the Depths 170

XXIII. In the Eyes of the Crees . . 175
XXIV. On the Cliffs 181
XXV. Inspector Wallace Takes Charge 188
XXVI. The Whelps of the Wolf . . 193
XXVII. The Trap is Sprung . . . 198
XXVIII. Bitter-Sweet 212
XXIX. The Fangs of the Half-breeds . 216
XXX. Cree Justice 224
XXXI. The Way of a Dog 228
XXXII. From the Far Frontiers . . 234
XXXIII. Renunciation 238
XXXIV. The Voice of the Windigo . . 243
XXXV. Raw Wounds 253
XXXVI. Dreams 259
XXXVII. For Love of a Girl 264
XXXVIII. The White Trail to Fort George 270
XXXIX. The Hate of the Long Snows . 280
XL. "He's Got His Man!" . . . 290
XLI. As Ye Sow 296

The Whelps of the Wolf

CHAPTER I

THE LAND OF THE WINDIGO

THE solitudes of the East Coast had shaken off the grip of the long snows. A thousand streams and rivers choked with snow water from bleak Ungava hills plunged and foamed and raced into the west, seeking the salt Hudson's Bay, the "Big Water" of the Crees. In the lakes the honeycombed ice was daily fading under the strengthening sun. Already, here and there the buds of the willows reddened the river shores, while the southern slopes of sun-warmed ridges were softening with the pale green of the young leaves of birch and poplar. Long since, the armies of the snowy geese had passed, bound for far Arctic islands; while marshes and muskeg were vocal with the raucous clamor of the nesting gray goose. In the air of the valleys hung the odor of wood mold and wet earth.

And one day, with the spring, returned Jean

Marcel from his camp on the Ghost, the northernmost tributary of the Great Whale to the bald ridge, where, in March, he had seen the sun glitter on a broad expanse of level snow unbroken by trees, in the hills to the north. His eyes had not deceived him. The lake was there.

From his commanding position on the bare brow of the isolated mountain, he looked out on a wilderness of timbered valleys, and high barrens which rolled away endlessly into the north. Among these lay a large body of water partly free of ice. Into the northeast he could trace the divide—even make out where a small feeder of the Ghost headed on the height of land. And he now knew that he looked upon the dread valleys of the forbidden country of the Crees—the demon-haunted solitudes of the land of the Windigo, whose dim, blue hills guarded a region of mystery and terror—a wilderness, peopled in the tales of the medicine men, with giant eaters of human flesh and spirits of evil, for generations, taboo to the hunters of Whale River.

There was no doubt of it. The large lake he saw was a headwater of the Big Salmon, the southern sources of which tradition placed in the bad-lands north of the Ghost. Once his canoe floated in this lake, he could work into the main river and find the Esquimos on the coast.

"Bien!" muttered the Frenchman, "I will go!"

Two days later, back in camp on the Ghost, Marcel announced to his partners, Antoine Beaulieu and Joe Piquet, his intention of returning to the Bay by the Big Salmon.

"W'at you say, Jean; you go home tru de Windigo countree?" cried Piquet, his swart face blanched by the fear which the very mention of the forbidden land aroused, while Antoine, speechless, stared wide-eyed.

"Oui, nord of de divide, I see beeg lac. Eet ees Salmon water for sure. I portage cano' to dat lac and reach de coast by de riviere. You go wid me an' get some dog?" Marcel smiled coolly into the sober faces of his friends.

"Are you crazee, Jean Marcel?" protested Antoine. "De spirit have run de game an' feesh away. De Windigo eat you before you fin' de Salmon, an' eef he not get you first, you starve."

"Ver' well, you go back by de Whale; I go by Salmon an' meet de Husky. I nevaire hunt anoder long snow widout dogs."

"Ah-hah! Dat ees good joke! You weel nevaire see de Husky," broke in Piquet. "W'en *Matchi-Manitou* ees tru wid you, de raven an' wolf peek your bones, w'ile Antoine an' Joe dance at de spreeng trade wid de Cree girl."

Ignoring the dire prediction, Marcel continued: "Good dog are all gone at Whale Riviere Post from de maladie. De Husky have plenty dog. I meet dem on de coast before dey reach Whale Riviere an' want too much fur for dem. Maybe I starve; maybe I drown een de strong-water; maybe de Windigo get me; but I go."

And he did.

With a shrug of contempt for the tales of the medicine men, dramatically rehearsed with all the embellishment which the imagination of his superstitious partners could invent, the following day Marcel started.

"Bo'-jo', Antoine!" he said, as he gripped his friend's hand. "I meet you at Whale Riviere."

The face of Beaulieu only too patently reflected his thoughts as he shook his head.

"Bo'-jo', Jean, I nevaire see you again."

"You are dead man, Jean," added Piquet; "we tell Julie Breton dat your bones lie up dere." And the half-breed pointed north to the dim, blue hills of dread.

So with fur-pack and outfit, and as much smoked caribou as he dared carry, Marcel poled his canoe up the Ghost, later to portage across the divide into the trailless land where, in the memory of living man, the feet of no hunter of the Hudson's Bay Company had strayed.

It was a reckless venture—this attempt to reach the Bay through an unknown country. The demons of the Cree conjurors he did not fear, for his father and his mother's father, who had journeyed, starved, and feasted in trailless lands, from Labrador to the great Barren Grounds, had never seen one or heard the wailing of the Windigo in the night. But what he did fear was the possibility of weeks of wandering in his search for the main stream, lost in a labyrinth of headwater lakes where game might be scarce and fish difficult to net. For his smoked meat would take him but a short way, when his rifle and net would have to see him through.

But the risk was worth taking. If he could reach the Esquimos on their spring journey south to the post, before they learned of the scarcity of dogs at Whale River, he could obtain huskies at a fair trade in fur. And a dog-team was his heart's desire.

Portaging over the divide to the large lake, now clear of ice, Marcel followed its winding outlet into the northwest. There were days when, baffled by a maze of water routes in a network of lakes, he despaired of finding the main stream. There were nights when he lay supperless by his fire thinking of Julie Breton, the black-eyed sister of the Oblat Missionary at Whale River—nights when the forebodings of his partners returned to mock him as a maniacal mewing broke the silence of the forest, or, across the valleys, drifted low wailing sobs, like the grieving of a Cree mother for her dead child.

But in the veins of Jean Marcel coursed the blood of old *coureurs-de-bois.* His parents, victims of the influenza which had swept the coast the year previous, had left him the heritage of a dauntless spirit. Lost and starving though he was, he smiled grimly as the roving wolverine and the lynx turned the night into what would have been a thing of horror to the superstitious breeds.

When, gaunt from toil and the lack of food, Marcel finally found the main stream and shot a bear, he knew he would reach the Esquimos. Two hundred miles of racing river he rapidly put behind him and one June day rounded the bend above a long white-water. The *voyageur* ran the rapids, rode the "boilers" at the foot of the last pitch and shot into deep water again. But as he swung inshore to rid the craft of the slop picked up in the churning "strong-water" behind him, Marcel's eyes widened in surprise. He was nearer the sea than he had guessed. His last rapids had been run. He had reached his goal, for on the shore stood the squat skin lodges of an Esquimo camp, and moving about on the beach, he saw the shaggy objects of his quest.

The lean face of the youth who had bearded the dreaded Windigo in their lair shaped a wide smile.

He, too, would dance at the spring trade at Whale River, and lashed to stakes by his tent in the post clearing, a pair of priceless Ungavas would add their howls to the chorus when the dogs pointed their noses at the new moon.

CHAPTER II

THE END OF THE TRAIL

In his joy at his good luck, Marcel had momentarily forgotten the ancient feud between the Esquimo and the Cree. Then he realized his position. These rapids of the Salmon were an age-old fishing ground of the Esquimos, who, with their dogs, are called "Huskies." No birch-bark had ever run the broken waters behind him—no Indian hunted so far north. If among these people there were any who traded at Whale River where Cree and Esquimo met in amity, they would recognize the son of the old Company head man, André Marcel, and welcome him. But should they chance to be wild Huskies who did not come south to the post, they would mistake him for a Cree, and resenting his entering their territory, attack him.

Drawing his rifle from its skin case, he placed it at his feet and poled slowly toward the shore where a bedlam of howls from the dogs signalled his approach. The clamor quickly emptied the lodges scattered along the beach. A group of Huskies, armed with rifle and seal spear, now watched the strange craft. So close was the canoe that only by a miracle could Marcel hope to escape downstream if they started shooting.

Alive to his danger, the Frenchman snubbed his boat, leaning on his pole, while his anxious eyes searched for a familiar figure in the skin-clad throng, who talked and gesticulated in evident excitement. But among them he found no friendly face.

Was it for this he had slaved overland to the Salmon and starved through the early spring—a miserable death; when he had won through to his goal—when the yelps of the dogs he sought rang in his ears? Surely, among these Huskies, there were some who traded at the post.

"Kekway!" he called, "I am white man from Whale River!"

The muscles of Jean Marcel set, tense as wire cables, as he watched for a hostile movement from the Huskies, silenced by his shout. Seemingly surprised by his action, no answer was returned from the shore. Slowly his hopes died. They were wild Esquimos and would show no mercy to the supposed Cree invader of their hereditary fishing ground.

But still the movement which the Frenchman's roving eyes awaited, was delayed. Not a gun in the whispering throng on the beach was raised; not a word in Esquimo addressed to the stranger. Mystified, desperate from the strain of the suspense, Marcel called again, this time in post Husky:

"I am white man, from the fort at Whale River. Is there one among you who trades there?"

At the words, the tension of the sullen group seemed to relax. Pointing to a thick-set figure striding up the beach, a Husky shouted:

"There is one who goes to Whale River!"

The *voyageur* expelled the air from his lungs with relief. Too long, with pounding heart, he had steeled himself to face erect, swift death from the near shore. A wrong move, and a hail of lead would have emptied his canoe. Then to his joy he recognized the man who approached.

"Kovik!" he shouted. "Eet ees Jean Marcel from Whale Riviere!"

The Husky waved his hand to Marcel, joined his comrades, and, for a space, there was much talk and shaking of heads; then he called to Jean to come ashore.

Grounding his canoe, Marcel gripped the hand of the grinning Kovik while the Huskies fell back eying them with mingled curiosity and fear.

"Husky say you bad spirit, Kovik say you son little chief, Whale River. W'ere you come?"

It was clear, now, why the Esquimos had not wiped him out. They had thought him a demon, for Esquimo tradition, as well as Cree, made the upper Salmon the abode of evil spirits.

"I look for hunteen ground, on de head of riviere," explained Jean, for the admission that he was in search of dogs would only defeat the purpose of his journey.

"Good dat Kovik come," returned the Esquimo. "Some say shoot you; some say you eat de bullet an' de Husky."

To this difference of opinion Marcel owed his life.

As Kovik finished his explanation, Jean laughed: "No, I camp wid no Windigo up riviere; but I starve."

At this gentle hint, Marcel was invited to join in the supper of boiled seal and goose which was waiting at the tepee. When Kovik had prevailed upon some of the older Esquimos to forget their fears and shake hands with the man who had appeared from the land of spirits, Jean stowed his outfit on the cache of the Husky, freed his canoe of water and placing it beside his packs, joined the family party. Shaking hands in turn with Kovik's grinning wife and children, who remembered him at Whale River, Marcel hungrily attacked the kettle, into which each dipped fingers and cup indiscriminately. Finishing, he passed a plug of

Company nigger-head to his hosts and lit his own pipe.

"W'ere you' woman?" abruptly inquired the thick-set mother of many.

"No woman," replied Marcel, thinking of three spruce crosses in the Mission cemetery at Whale River.

"No woman, you? No dog?" pressed the curious wife of Kovik.

"No famile." And Jean told of the deaths of parents and younger brother, from the plague of the summer before. But he failed to mention the fact that most of the dogs at the post had been wiped out at the same time.

"Ah! Ah!" groaned the Huskies at the Frenchman's tale of the scourge which had swept the Hudson's Bay posts to the south.

"He good man—Marcel! He fr'en' of me!" lamented Kovik. Sucking his pipe, he gravely nodded again and again. Surely, he intimated, the Company had displeased the spirits of evil to have been so punished. Then he asked: "W'ere you dog?"

"On Whale Riviere," returned Jean grimly, referring to their bones; his eyes held by the great dogs sprawled about the beach. No such sled-dogs as these had he ever seen at the post, even with the

Esquimos. But his grave face betrayed no sign of what was in his mind.

Massive of bone and frame, with coats unusually heavy, even for the far-famed Ungava breed, Jean noted the strength and size of these magnificent beasts as a horseman marks the points of a blooded colt. Somewhat apart from the other dogs of Kovik, tumbling and roughing each other, frolicked four clumsy puppies, while the mother, a great slate-gray and white animal, lay near, watching her progeny through eyes whose lower lids, edged with red, marked the wolf strain. While those slant eyes kept restless guard, to molest one of her leggy, yelping imps of Satan would have been the bearding of a hundred furies. The older dogs, evidently knowing the power in the snap of her white fangs, avoided the puppies.

One, in particular, Marcel noticed as they romped and roughed each other on the shore, or with a brave show of valor, noisily charged their recumbent mother, only to be sent about their business with the mild reprimand of a nip from her long fangs. Larger, and of sturdier build than her brothers, this puppy, in marking, was the counterpart of the mother, having the same slate-gray patches on head and back and wearing white socks. As he watched her bully her brothers, Jean resolved to buy that four-months'-old puppy.

As the northern twilight filled the river valley, the Huskies returned to the lodge, where Jean squeezed in between two younger members of the family whose characteristic aroma held sleep from the fatigued *voyageur* long enough for him to decide on a plan of action. Before he started to trade for dogs he must learn if the Esquimos knew that they were scarce at the fur-posts. If rumor of this relayed up the coast from Husky hunting party to hunting party, had reached them, he would be lucky to get even a puppy. They would send their spare dogs to the posts.

The following morning, at the suggestion of Kovik, Marcel set his gill-net for whitefish on the opposite shore of the wide river, as the younger Esquimos showed unmistakably by their actions that his presence at the salmon fishing, soon to begin, was resented. But Jean needed food for his journey down the coast and for the dogs he hoped to buy, so ignored the dark looks cast at the mysterious white man, the friend of Kovik. But not until evening did he casually suggest to the Husky that he had more dogs than he could feed through the summer.

The broad face of Kovik widened in a mysterious smile as he asked: "You geeve black fox for dog?"

Marcel's hopes fell at the words. It was an unheard of price for a dog. The Husky knew.

Masking his chagrin, the Frenchman laughed in ridicule:

"I geeve otter for dog."

Kovik shook his head, his narrowed eyes wrinkling in amusement. "No husky W'ale Riv'—For' Geor'. Me trade husky W'ale Riv'."

It was useless to bargain further. The Husky knew the value of his dogs at the posts, and Jean could not afford to rob his fur-pack to get one. There was much that he needed at Whale River—and then there was Julie. It was necessary to increase his credit with the Company to pay for the home he would some day build for Julie and himself. So, when Kovik promptly refused a valuable cross-fox pelt for a dog, the disheartened boy gave it up.

But after the toil and lean days of the long trail he had taken to meet the Esquimos, he could not return to Whale River empty handed. He coveted the slate-gray and white puppy. Never had he seen a husky of her age with such bone—such promise as a sled dog. And her spirit—at four months she would bare her puppy fangs at an infringement of her rights by an old dog, as though she already wore the scars of many a brawl. Handsomer than her brothers, leader of the litter by virtue of a build more rugged, a stronger will, she was the favorite of Kovik's children. That they would object to parting with her; that the Husky would demand an exorbitant price he now knew; but he was determined to have the puppy. However, he resolved to wait until the following day, renew the bargaining for a grown dog, then suddenly make an offer for the puppy.

The next morning Jean Marcel again offered a high price for a dog, but the smiling Husky would not relent. Then Marcel, pointing at the female puppy, offered the pelt of a marten for her.

To Jean's surprise, the owner refused to part with any of the litter. They would be better than the adult dogs—these children of the slate-gray husky—he said, and he would sell but one or two, even at Whale River, where the Company needed dogs badly and would pay more than Marcel could offer.

It was a bitter moment for the lad who had swung his canoe inshore at the Husky camp with such high hopes. And he realized that it would be useless to turn north from the mouth of the Salmon in search of dogs. Now that they had learned of conditions at the fur-posts, no Esquimos bound south for the spring trade would sell a dog at a reasonable price.

As the disheartened Marcel watched with envious eyes the puppies, which he realized were beyond his means to obtain, the cries from the shore of the eldest son of his host aroused the camp. Above them, in the chutes at the foot of the white-water, flashes of silver marked the leaping vanguards of the salmon run, on their way to spring-fed streams at the river's head.

Seizing their salmon spears the Esquimos hurried up-stream to take their stands on rocks which the fish might pass. Having no spear Jean watched the younger Kovik wade through the strong current out to a rock within spearing reach of a deep chute of black water. Presently the crouching lad drove his spear into the flume at his feet and was struggling on the rock with a large salmon. Killing the fish with his knife, he threw it, with a cry of triumph, to the beach. Again he waited, muscles tense, his right arm drawn back for the lunge. Again, as a silvery shape darted up the chute, the boy struck with his spear. But so anxious was he to drive the lance home, that, missing the fish, his lunge carried him head-first into the swift water.

With a shout of warning to those above, Jean Marcel ran down the beach. His canoe was out of reach on the cache with the Husky's kayak, and the clumsy skin umiak of the family was useless for quick work. In his sealskin boots and clothes the lad would be carried to the foot of the rapids and drowned. Jean reached the "boilers" below the white-water before the body of the helpless Esquimo appeared. Plunging into the ice-cold river he swam out into the current below the tail of the chute, and when the half-drowned lad floundered to the surface, seized him by his heavy hair. As they were swept down-stream an eddy threw their bodies together, and in spite of Marcel's desperate efforts, the arms of the Husky closed on him in vise-like embrace. Strong as he was, the Frenchman could not break the grip, and they sank.

The *voyageur* rose to the surface fighting to free himself from the clinging Esquimo, but in vain; then his sinewy fingers found the throat of the half-conscious boy and taking a long breath, he again went down with his burden. When the two came up Marcel was free. With a grip on the long hair of the now senseless lad he made the shore, and dragging the Husky from the water, stretched exhausted on the beach.

Shaking with cold he lay panting beside the still body of the boy, when the terrified Esquimos reached them.

The welcome heat of a large fire soon thawed the chill from the bones of Marcel; but the anxious parents desperately rolled and pounded the Husky, starting his blood and ridding his stomach of water, before he finally regained his voice, begging them to cease.

With the boy out of danger they turned to his rescuer, and only by vigorous objection did Marcel escape the treatment administered the Husky. He would prefer drowning, he protested with a grimace, to the pounding they had given the boy.

"You lak' seal in de water," cried the relieved father with admiration, when he had lavished his thanks upon Jean; for the Esquimos, although passing their lives on or near the water, because of its low temperature, never learn to swim.

"My fader taught me to swim een shallow lak' by Fort George," explained the modest Frenchman.

"He die, eef you no sweem lak' seal," added the grateful mother, her round face oily with sweat from the vigorous rubbing of her son, now snoring peacefully by the fire.

Then the Huskies returned to their fishing, for precious time was being wasted. The boy's spear was found washed up on the beach and loaned to Jean, who labored the remainder of the day spearing salmon for his journey down the coast.

That evening, after supper, Jean sat on a stone in front of the tepee watching the active puppies. Inside the skin lodge the Esquimo and his wife conversed in low tones. Shortly they appeared and Kovik, grinning from long side-lock to side-lock, said:

"You good man! You trade dat dog?" He pointed at the large slate-gray puppy sprawled near them.

The dark features of Jean Marcel lighted with eagerness.

"I geeve two marten for de dog," he said, rising quickly.

The Husky turned to the woman, shaking his head.

Marcel's lip curled at the avarice of these people whose son he had so recently snatched from death.

Then Kovik, seemingly changing his mind, seized the puppy by the loose skin of her neck and dragged her, protesting vigorously, to Jean, while the mother dog came trotting up, ears erect, curious of what the master she feared was doing with her progeny.

"Dees you' dog!" said the Esquimo.

Marcel patted the back of the puppy, still in the grasp of her owner, while she muttered her wrath at the touch of the stranger. Although they owed him much, he thought, yet these Huskies wished to make him pay dearly for the dog. Still he was glad to get her, even at such a price. So he went to the cache, loosened the lashings of his fur-pack, and returned with two prime marten pelts, offering them to the Esquimo.

Again Kovik's round face was divided by a grin. The wrinkles radiated from the narrow eyes which snapped.

"You lak' seal in riv'—ketch boy. Tak' de dog

—we no want skin." And shaking his head, the Husky pushed away the pelts.

Slowly the face of Marcel changed with surprise as he sensed the import of Kovik's words. They were making him a present of the dog.

"You—you geeve to me—dese puppy?" he stammered, staring into the grinning face of the Esquimo, delighted with the success of his little ruse.

Kovik nodded.

"T'anks, t'anks!" cried Jean, his eyes suspiciously moist as he wrung the Husky's hand, then seized that of the chuckling woman. "You are good people; I not forget de Kovik."

He had done these honest Esquimos a wrong. Now, after the fear of defeat, and the bitterness, the puppy he had coveted was his. He was not to return to Whale River empty handed, the laughing-stock of his partners. It had been indeed worth while, his plunge into the bad-lands, for in two years he would have the dog-team of his dreams. Some day this four-months-old puppy should make the fortune of Jean Marcel.

But little he realized, as he exulted in his good luck, how vital a part in his life, and in the life of Julie Breton, this wild puppy with the white socks was to play.

CHAPTER III

THE FRIEND OF DEMONS

WHEN Marcel put his canoe into the water the following morning, to cross to his net, three young Esquimos, who had been loitering near Kovik's lodge, followed him to the beach, and as he left the shore, hurled at his back a torrent of Husky abuse.

What he had hoped to avoid had come. It would have been better to listen to Kovik's warning against delaying his departure and attempting to fish at the rapids after the salmon arrived. The use of the boy's spear, the day previous, had brought the feeling among the younger men to a head. They meant to drive him down river.

Removing the whitefish and small salmon, Jean lifted his net and stretching it to dry on the shore, recrossed the stream. On the beach awaiting his return were the Huskies. Clearly, they had decided that he was possessed of no supernatural powers and could now be bullied with impunity. As he did not wish to embroil his friend Kovik in his defense, when he had smoked his last catch he would leave. But the blood of the fighting Marcels was slowly coming to a boil. If these raw fish-eaters thought that they could frighten the grandson of the famous Étienne Lacasse, and the son of André Marcel, whose strength was a tradition on the East Coast, he could show them their mistake. Still, avoid trouble he must, for a fight would be suicide.

So ignoring the Huskies, who talked together in low tones, Marcel landed, cleaned some fish for the Koviks' kettle, and carried them up to the tepee where the family were still asleep. Returning, the hot blood rose to the bronzed face of the Frenchman at what he saw.

The three Esquimos were coolly feeding his fish to the dogs.

Reckless of the consequences, in the blind rage which choked him, Marcel reached the pilferers of his canoe before they realized that he was on them. Seizing one by his long hair, with a wrench he hurled the surprised Husky backward into the water and sent a second reeling to the stony beach with a fierce blow in the face. The third, retreating from the fury of the attack of the maddened white man, drew his skinning knife; but seizing his paddle, Marcel sent the knife spinning with a vicious slash which doubled the screaming Husky over a broken wrist. Turning, he saw his first victims making down the beach toward the tepees, while the uproar of the dogs was swiftly arousing the camp.

Then, as his blood cooled and his judgment returned, the youth, who had suffered and dared much that he might have dogs for the next long snows, realized the height of his folly. They had baited him into furnishing them with an excuse for attacking him. Now even the faithful Kovik would be helpless against them. He would never see Whale River and Julie Breton again. Already the Huskies were emerging from their tepees, to hear the tale of his late antagonists. There was no time to lose before they rushed him.

Bounding up the beach to Kovik's tepee for his rifle, he rapidly explained the situation to the Esquimo, while in his ears rang the shouts of the excited Huskies and the yelping of the dogs. Jean did not hope to escape alive from this bedlam, but of one thing he was sure, he would die like a Marcel, with a smoking gun in his hands.

Urging Jean to get his fur-pack and smoked fish to his canoe at once, Kovik hurried down the shore to the knot of wildly excited Esquimos.

With the aid of the grateful wife and son of Kovik, Marcel's canoe was swiftly loaded and his treasured puppy lashed in the bow. But the rush up the beach of an infuriated throng bent on his death, which Marcel stoically awaited beside a large boulder, was delayed. Not a hundred yards distant, the doughty Kovik, the center of an arguing mob, was fighting with all the wits he possessed for the man who had saved his son. For Marcel to attempt to escape by water would only have drawn the fire of the Huskies and nullified Kovik's efforts, and their kayaks, faster than any canoe, were below him. A break for the "bush," even if successful, in the end, meant starvation. So with extra cartridges between his teeth, and in his hands, Jean Marcel grimly fingered the trigger-guard of his rifle, as he waited at the boulder for the turn of the dice down the shore.

Minutes, each one an eternity to the man at bay, passed. But Kovik still held his men, and Marcel clearly noted a change in the manner of the Huskies. The shouting had ceased. His friend was winning.

Shortly, Kovik left the group and walked rapidly toward Marcel, followed at a distance by his people.

"Dey keel you, but Kovik say you fr'en' wid spirit; he come down riv' an' eat Husky," explained the worried defender of Jean. "Kovik say you shoot wid spirit gun, all de Husky; so you go, queek!"

The broad face of Kovik split in a grim smile as he gripped the hand of the relieved Marcel and pushed off his canoe. Thus, doubly, had the loyal Esquimo paid for the life of his son.

With the emotions of a man suddenly reprieved from a sentence of death, Marcel poled his canoe out into the current. Behind him, the Esquimos had already joined Kovik on the shore, when, warned by a shout from his friend, Marcel instinctively ducked as a seal spear whistled over his head. Some doubter was testing the magic of the white demon.

Seizing his paddle Jean swiftly crossed the river and secured his precious net. But he was not yet rid of his enemies. If the young men, conquering their fear of his friendship with demons, at once launched their kayaks, they could overhaul his loaded canoe. But once clear of the last tepees, with his pursuers behind him, he was confident that he could pick them off with his rifle as fast as they came up in their rocking craft.

With all the power of his iron back and shoulders, Jean drove his canoe on the strong current; but Kovik had the Huskies in hand and they did not follow. Shortly he had passed the last lodge on the shore and the camp was soon in the distance. It seemed like a dream—his peril of the last hour; and now, a free man again, with his puppy in the bow, he was on his way to the coast and Julie Breton.

Suddenly two rifles cracked in the rocks on the near beach. The paddle of Marcel dropped from his limp hands. Headlong he lurched to the floor of the canoe. Again the guns spat from the boulders. Two bullets whined over the birch-bark. But save for the yelping puppy in the bow, there was no movement in the canoe, as it slid, the cat's-paw of the current.

Waving their arms in triumph at the collapse of the feared white man, whose magic had been impotent before their bullets, the Huskies hurried along shore after the canoe. Carried by breeze and current, with its whimpering puppy and silent human freight the craft grounded a half-mile below the ambush. On came the chattering pair of assassins, already quarrelling over the division of the outfit of the dead man—delirious with the sweetness of their vengeance for the rough handling the stricken one in the canoe had meted out to them but an hour before. The dog, although lashed to the bow thwart, had managed to crawl out of the boat and was struggling with the thongs which held her, when the Huskies came running up. Staring into the birch-bark, they turned to each other gray faces on which was written ghastly fear.

The canoe was empty!

The white man they had thought to find a bloodied heap, was, after all, a maker of magic—a friend of demons. Kovik had told the truth. They were lost!

Palsied with dread, their feet frozen to the beach, the young ruffians awaited the swift vengeance of their enemy. And it came.

Hard by, a rifle crashed in the boulders. With a scream, a Husky reeled backward with a shattered hand, as his gun, torn from his grasp by the impact of the bullet, rattled on the stones. A second shot, splintering the butt of his rifle, hurled the other to his knees. Then with a demonical yell, Marcel sprang from his ambush.

Running like caribou jumped by barren-ground wolves, the panic-stricken Huskies fled from the place of horror, pursued by the ricochetting bullets of the white demon, until they disappeared up the shore.

" A'voir, M'sieurs! " cried Marcel. " De nex' tam you ambush cano', don' let eet dref behin' de point." And shaking with laughter, turned to his yelping puppy, frenzied with excitement.

" De Husky t'ink we not go to Whale Riviere, eh? " he said, stroking the trembling shoulders of the worrying dog. " But Jean and hees petite chienne, dey see Julie Breton jus' de same."

Putting his puppy in the canoe, Marcel continued on down the river.

When the shots from ambush whined past his face, Marcel had flattened to the floor of the craft, both for cover and to deceive the Huskies. The second shots convinced him that he had but two to deal with. Slitting the bark skin near the gunwale, that he might watch the shore without betraying the fact that he was conscious, and thereby draw their fire, while they were protected from his by the boulders, he learned that the craft was working toward the beach.

His plan was swiftly made. Driven by the racing current, the canoe had already left the Esquimos, following the shore, in the rear. He would allow the craft to ground and hold his fire until they were on top of him. But the boat finally reached the beach at a point hidden from the pursuing Huskies. With a bound Marcel was out of the canoe and concealed among the rocks. Great as was the temptation to leave the men who had ambushed him in cold blood, shot upon the beach, a sinister warning to their fellows, the thought of Kovik's position at the camp forced him to content himself with disarming and sending them shrieking up the shore with his bullets worrying their heels.

Often, during the day, as Marcel put mile after mile of the Salmon between himself and the camp at the rapids, the puppy cocked curious ears as the new master ceased paddling, to roar with laughter at the memory of two flying Esquimos.

CHAPTER IV

HOME AND JULIE BRETON

THAT night Marcel camped at the river's mouth and watched the gray waters of the great Bay drown the sinking sun. Somewhere, far down the bold East Coast the Great Whale emptied into the salt "Big Water" of the Crees. He remembered having heard the old men at the post say that the Big Salmon lay four "sleeps" of fair weather to the north—four days of hard paddling, as the Company canoes travel, if the sea was flat and the wind light. But if he were wind-bound, as was likely heading south in the spring, it might take weeks. He had a hundred pounds of cured fish and could wait out the wind, but the thought of Julie, who by this time must have learned from his partners of his mad journey, made Jean anxious to reach the post. He preferred to be welcomed living than mourned as dead. He wondered how deeply she would feel it—his death. Ah, if she only cared for him as he loved her! Well, she should love him in time, when he had become a *voyageur* of the Company, with a house at the post, he told himself, as he patted his shy puppy before turning into his blankets.

The second day out he was driven ashore under gray cliffs by a south-wester and spent the succeeding three days in overcoming the shyness of the hulking puppy, who, in the gentleness of the new master, found swift solace for the loss of her shaggy kinsmen of the Husky camp. Already she had learned that the human hand could caress as well as wield a stick, and for the first time in her short existence, was initiated into the mystery and delight of having her ears rubbed and back scratched by this master who did not kick her out of the way when she sprawled in his path. And because of her beauty, and in memory of Fleur Marcel, the mother he had loved, he named her Fleur.

When the sea flattened out after the blow, Marcel launched his canoe, and, with his dog in the bow, continued south. Not a wheeling gull, flock of whistling yellow-legs, or whiskered face of inquisitive seal, thrust from the water only as quickly to disappear, escaped the notice of the eager puppy. Passing low islands where teal and pin-tail rose in clouds at his approach, driving Fleur into a frenzy of excitement, at last he turned in behind a long island paralleling the coast.

For two days Jean travelled down the strait in the lee of this island and knew when he passed out into open water and saw in the distance the familiar coast of the Whale River mouth, that he had travelled through the mystic Manitounuk, the Esquimos' Strait of the Spirit. The following afternoon off Sable Point he entered the clear water of the Great Whale and once again, after ten months' absence, saw on the bold shore in the distance the roofs of Whale River.

There was a lump in the throat of Jean Marcel as he gazed at the distant fur-post. That little settlement, with its log trade-house and church of the Oblat Fathers, the last outpost of the Great Company on the bleak East Coast, which for two centuries had defied the grim north, stood for all he held most dear—was home. There, in the church burial ground enclosed by a slab fence, three spruce crosses marked the graves of his father, mother and brother. There in the Mission House, built by Cree converts, lived Julie Breton.

As the young flood swept him up-stream he wondered if already he had been counted as lost by his friends at the post—for it was July; whether the thoughts of Julie Breton sometimes wandered north to the lad who had disappeared into the Ungava hills on a mad quest; or if, with the others, she had given him up as starved or drowned—numbered him with that fated legion who had gone out into the wide north never to return.

Nearing the post, the canoe began to pass the floats of gill-nets set for whitefish and salmon. He could now see the tepees of the Whale River Crees, dotting the high shores, and below, along the beach, the squat skin lodges of the Huskies, with their fish scaffolds and umiaks. The spring trade was on.

Beaching his canoe at the Company landing, where he was welcomed as one returned from the dead by two post Crees, Marcel, leading his dog by a rawhide thong, sought the Mission House.

At his knock the door was opened by a girl with dusky eyes and masses of black hair, who stared in amazement at the *voyageur.*

"Julie!" he cried.

Then she found her voice, while the blood flushed her olive skin.

"Jean Marcel! *vous etes revenu!* You have come back!" exclaimed the girl, continuing the conversation in French.

"Oh, Jean! We had great fear you might not return." He was holding both her hands but, embarrassed, she did not meet his eager eyes seeking to read her thoughts.

"Come in, *M'sieu le voyageur!*" and she led him gayly into the Mission. "Henri, Père Henri!" she called. "Jean Marcel has returned from the dead!"

"Jean, my son!" replied a deep voice, and Père Breton was vigorously embracing the man he had thought never to see again.

"Father, your greeting is somewhat warmer than that of Julie," laughed the happy youth, as the bearded priest surveyed him at arm's length.

"Ah, she has spoken much of you, Jean, this spring. None the worse for the long voyage, my son?" he continued. "You will be the talk of Whale River; the Crees said you could not get through. And you got your dogs? We have only curs here, except those of the Huskies, and they are very dear."

"The Huskies would not sell their dogs, Father. They were bringing them to Whale River."

Then Marcel sketched briefly to his wondering friends the history of his wanderings and his meeting with the Huskies on the Big Salmon.

As he finished the tale of his escape from the camp with his puppy, and later from the ambush, Julie Breton's dark eyes were wet with tears.

"Oh, Jean Marcel, why did you take such risks? You might have starved—they might have killed you!"

His eyes lighted with tenderness as they met the girl's questioning face.

"I had to have dogs, Julie. I must save my credit with the Company. It was the only way."

"Let me see your puppy! Where is she?" demanded the girl.

Jean led his friends outside the Mission, where he had fastened his dog. The wild puppy shrank from the strangers, the hair bristling on her neck, as Julie impulsively thrust a hand toward the dog's handsome head.

"Oh, but she is cross!" she exclaimed. "What is her name?"

"Fleur; it was my mother's."

"Too nice a name for such an impolite dog!"

Jean stroked Fleur's head as she crouched against his legs muttering her dislike of strangers. At his caress, her warm tongue sought his hand.

"There," he said proudly, his white teeth flashing in a grin at Julie, "you see here is one who loves Jean Marcel."

At the invitation of Père Breton, the *voyageur* shut his dog in the Mission stockade, where she would be free from attack by the post Huskies and safe from some covetous Cree, and gladly took possession of an empty room in the building.

CHAPTER V

THE MOON OF FLOWERS

As the grim fastnesses reaching away to the north and east and south in limitless, ice-locked solitude, had wakened to the magic touch of spring, so the little post at Whale River had quickened with life at the advent of June with the spring trade. For weeks, before the return of Marcel, the canoes of the Crees had been coming in daily from winter trapping grounds in far valleys,. Around the tepees, which dotted the post clearing like mushrooms, groups of dark-skinned women, heads wrapped in gaudy shawls, laughed and gossiped, while the shrill voices of romping children filled the air, for the lean moons of the long snows had passed and the soft days returned.

Swart hunters from Lac d'Iberville, half-breed Crees from the Whispering Hills and the Little Whale watershed, belted with colored Company sashes, wearing beaded leggings and moccasins, smoked and talked of the trade with wild *voyageurs* from Lac Bienville, the Lakes of the Winds, and the Starving River headwaters in the caribou barrens. From a hundred unmapped valleys they had journeyed to the Bay to trade their fox and lynx, their mink and fisher and marten, for the goods of the Company.

Below, along the beach, Huskies from Richmond Gulf and the north coast, from the White Bear and the Sleeping Islands, who had brought ivory of the walrus, pelts of the white fox, seal, and polar bear, and sealskin boots, which only their women possess the art of making waterproof, were camped in low skin tepees, their priceless dogs tied up and under constant guard. But while the camp of the Esquimos was a bedlam of noisy huskies, the quarters of the Crees in the post clearing, formerly overrun by brawling sled-dogs, were now a place of peace. The plague of the previous summer had left the Indians but a scattering of curs.

Carrying his fur-pack and outfit to the Mission, Marcel sought the trade-house. Passing the tepees of the Crees, he was forced to stop and receive the congratulations of the admiring hunters on his safe return from his "*longue traverse*" through the land of demons, which had been the gossip of the post since the arrival of Joe and Antoine.

When his partners appeared, to stare in amazement at the man they had announced as dead, Jean made them wince as he gripped their hands.

"Bo'-jo', Joe! Bo'-jo', Antoine!" he laughed. "You see de Windigo foun' Jean Marcel too tough to eat! He ees good fr'en' to me now. De Husky t'ink me devil too."

"I nevaire t'ink to see you alive at Whale Riviere, Jean Marcel!" cried the delighted Antoine.

"Did you get de dog?" asked the practical Piquet.

"Onlee one petite pup; de Husky would not trade." Then Jean hurriedly described his weeks on the Salmon.

As he entered the door of the long trade-house he was seized by a giant Company man.

"By Gar! Jean Marcel!" cried Jules Duroc, his swart face lighting with joy as he crushed the wanderer in a bear hug. "We t'ink you sure starve out een de bush! You fin' de Beeg Salmon headwater? You see de Windigo?"

"Oui, I fin' de riviere for sure, Jules; but de Windigo he scared of me. I tell heem Jean Marcel ees fr'en' of Jules Duroc."

The laughter in the doorway drew the attention of two men descending the ladder from the fur-loft.

"Well, as I live, Jean Marcel!" cried Colin Gillies, the factor, and he wrung the hand of the son of his old head man until Marcel grimaced with pain.

"You're sure good for sore eyes, Jean; we were about giving you up!" added Andrew McCain, the clerk, seizing Jean's free hand.

“Bon jour, M’sieu Gillies! Bon jour, Andrew! Dey say I leeve my bones on de Beeg Salmon; de Husky shoot at me; but—Tiens! I am here!”

“What? You had trouble with the Huskies?”

“Oui, dey t’o’t I was a devil, because I come down riviere from de Bad-Lands, but Kovik, he talk to dem an’ I stay. Tell dem I come from Whale Riviere. Den dey get mad because I feesh salmon at de rapide and mak’ trouble; and poor Kovik, he tell dem dat I am bad spirit, so I can get away.”

Jean laughed heartily at the memory of Kovik’s dilemma. “Dey mus’ t’ink poor Kovik ees damn liar by dees tam.” Then he added soberly, “But he save my life.”

Seated with his three friends, Marcel told of his struggle to reach the Salmon, his meeting with the Esquimos, and escape with his dog.

“So you got a dog after all, Jean? But you were crazy to take a chance with those Huskies; they won’t stand trespassing on their fisheries and they were shy of you because you came from the headwaters. I’m glad you didn’t kill that pair, much as they deserved it. It would have made trouble later.”

“Good old Kovik! We won’t forget him,” added McCain.

"No, that we will not," agreed Gillies. "He thought a lot of your father, Jean."

"Wal," said Jean proudly, "I weel have good dog-team een two year. Dat pup, she ees wort' all de work an' trouble to get her."

"You're lucky," said Gillies. "It's mighty hard on our hunters not to have good dogs, but they couldn't pay the Huskies' price. The Crees only took three for breeding purposes, and six cost us a thousand in trade. The rest were taken to Fort George and East Main."

The days at the Mission with Père Breton and Julie raced by—hours of unalloyed happiness for Jean after ten months in the "bush." Not a day passed that did not find him romping with the great puppy who had learned to gaze at her tall master through slant eyes eloquent with love. Each morning when he visited the Mission fish nets and his own, the puppy rode in the bow of the canoe. Each afternoon, often accompanied by Julie Breton, they went for a run up the river shore. Man and dog were inseparable.

When he heard that Kovik had arrived, Jean brought Fleur down to the shore, to find the family absent from their lodge. To Marcel's amazement, his puppy at first failed to recognize her brothers, who, yelping madly, rushed her in a mass.

With flattened ears, and mane stiffened on neck and back, their doughty sister met them half-way. Bowling one over, she shouldered another to the ground, where she threatened him with a fierce display of teeth. And not until their worried mother, made fast to a stake, had recognized her lost daughter and lured her within reach of her tongue, did the nose of Jean's puppy reveal to her the identity of her kin. Then there was a mad frolic in which she bullied and roughed her brothers as in the forgotten days before the master with the low voice and the hand that never struck her, took her away in his canoe.

When Kovik appeared in his umiak with his squat wife and family, there was a general handshaking.

"How you leeve my fr'en' on de Salmon, Kovik?"

The Husky gravely shook his head.

"Kovik have troub' wid young men you shoot. Dey say Kovik bad spirit too. You not hurt by dem?"

"Dey miss me an' I dreef down riviere an' ambush dem. I could keel dem easy but eet mak' eet bad for you. Here ees tabac, an' tea an' sugar for de woman. I tell M'sieu Gillies w'at you do for Jean Marcel."

When Jean had distributed his gifts, Fleur came trotting up, but to his delight refused to allow Kovik to touch her.

"Huh! Dat you' dog!" chuckled the Husky.

"Oui, she ees my dog, now," laughed Jean, and his heart went out to the puppy who already knew but one allegiance.

CHAPTER VI

FOR LOVE OF A DOG

THE spring trade at Whale River was nearing its end. One by one the tepees in the post clearing disappeared as, each day, canoes of Cree hunters started up-river for lakes of the interior, to net fish for the coming winter. Already the umiaks of the Esquimos peopled with women and children had followed the ebb-tide down to the great Bay, bound for their autumn hunting camps along the north coast.

When Jean Marcel had traded his fur and purchased what flour, ammunition and other supplies he needed to carry him through the long snows of the coming winter, he found that a substantial balance remained to his credit on the books of the Company; a nest egg, he hoped, for the day when, perchance, as a *voyageur* of the Company with a house at the post, he might stand with Julie at his side and receive the blessing of the good Père Breton. But Jean realized that that day was far away. Before he might hope to be honored by the Company with the position and trust his father had so long enjoyed, he knew he must prove his mettle and his worth; for the Company crews and dog-runners, entrusted with the mails, the fur-brigades and Company business in general, are men chosen for their intelligence, stamina and skill as canoemen and dog-drivers.

When he had packed his last load of winter supplies from the trade-house to the Mission, he said with a laugh to Julie:

"Julie, we have made a good start, you and I. We have credit of three hundred dollars with the Companee."

The olive skin of Julie Breton flushed to the dusky crown of hair, but she retorted with spirit:

"You are counting your geese before they are shot, M'sieu Jean. Merci! But I am very happy with Père Henri."

Père Breton's laugh interrupted Jean's reply. "Yes, my son. Julie is right. You are too young, you two, to think of anything but your souls."

"Some day, Julie, I will be a Company man and then you will listen to Jean Marcel," and the lad who had cherished the memory of the girl's oval face through the long winter and taken it with him into the dim, blue Ungava hills, left the Mission with head erect and swinging stride.

"Jean, when are you going back to the bush?" inquired Gillies, as Marcel entered the trade-house.

"My partners and I go next week, maybe."

"Well, I want you to take a canoe to Duck Island for me. We're short-handed here, and you have just come down that coast. I promised some Huskies to leave a cache of stuff there this summer."

Marcel's dark features reddened with pride. He had been put in charge of a canoe bound on Company business. His crossing to the Big Salmon had marked him at Whale River as a canoeman of daring—a chip of the old block, worthy of the name Marcel.

"Bien! M'sieu Gillies, when do we start?"

"To-day, after dinner!"

Returning to the Mission elated, Marcel ate his dinner, made up his pack while they wished him "Bon-voyage!" then went out to the stockade.

At the gate he was met simultaneously by the impact of a shaggy body and the swift licks of an eager tongue. Then Fleur circled him at full speed, yelping her delight, while she worked off the excitement of seeing her playmate again, until, at length, she trotted up and nosed his hand, keen for the daily rubbing of her ears which drew from her deep throat grateful mutterings of content.

"I leave my petite chienne for a few days," he whispered into a hairy ear. "She will be a good dog and obey Ma'm'selle Julie, who will feed her?"

The puppy broke away and ran to the gate, turning to him with pricked ears as she whined for the daily stroll into the scrub after snow-shoe rabbits.

"Non, ma petite! We walk not to-day!" He stroked the slate-gray back which trembled with her desire for a run with the master, then circling her shaggy neck with his arms, his face against hers, while she fretted as though she knew Jean was leaving her, said: "A'voir, Fleur!" and closed the gate.

She stood grieving, her black nose thrust between the slab pickets, the slant eyes following Marcel's back until he disappeared. Then she raised her head and, in the manner of her kind, voiced her disappointment in a long howl. And the wail of his puppy struck with strange insistence upon the ears of Jean Marcel—like a premonition of misfortune which the future held for him and which he often recalled in the weeks to come.

As the canoe of the Company journeyed through the Strait of the Spirit, flocks of gray geese, which were now leading their broods out to the coast islands from the muskegs of the interior, rose ahead, to sail away in their geometric formations, while clouds of pin-tail and black duck patrolled the low beaches.

Jean left his cargo for the Huskies in a stone cache and running into a south-wester, while homeward bound, did not reach Whale River for a fortnight. As he approached the post, he made out at the log landing the Company steamer *Inenew,* loaded with trade goods from the depot at Charlton Island. Through the clearing, now almost bare of tepees, for the trade was over, he walked to the Mission. The door was opened by Julie Breton.

"Bon-jour, Ma'm'selle Breton!" and he seized the unresponsive hand of the girl.

"I am glad to see you home safely, Jean." Something in the face and voice of the girl checked him.

"What is the matter, Julie?" he asked. "Père Henri; he is not ill?"

"No, Jean. Père Henri is well, but ——"

"You do not seem glad to see me again, Julie!"

"I am glad. You know that ——"

"Well," he flung out, hurt at the girl's constrained manner, "I'll go and see someone who will welcome Jean Marcel with no sober face ——"

"Jean!" she said as he turned away.

"What is it, Ma'm'selle Breton?" and he smiled into her troubled eyes. "Fleur has missed me, I know. She will give Jean Marcel a true welcome home."

"Jean—she is not there—they stole her!"

The face of Jean Marcel twisted with pain.

"Mon Dieu! Stole my Fleur—my puppy?"

"Yes, they took her from the stockade, two nights ago—two men who came up the coast after dogs."

With face buried in his arms to hide the tears misting his eyes, he leaned against the door jamb, while the girl rested a sympathetic hand on his shoulder.

"Poor Jean!"

"I worked so hard to get her. I loved that puppy, Julie; she was my child," he groaned.

"I know, Jean, how you feel; after what you have been through—to have lost her ——"

"But I have not lost her!" the boy exclaimed fiercely, drawing a deep breath and facing the girl with features set like stone. "I have not lost her, Julie Breton! I will follow them and bring back my dog if I have to trail those men to Rupert House."

The tears had gone and in the eyes of Jean Marcel was a glint she had never known—a glitter of hate for the men who had taken his dog, so intense, so bitter, that she thrilled inwardly as she gazed at his transformed face. Instinctively, Julie Breton knew that the lad who faced her was no longer the playmate of old to be treated as a boy, but the possessor of a high courage and unbreakable will that men in the future would reckon with.

Jean entered the trade-house to find Gillies in conversation with a tall stranger, who, Jules whispered, was Mr. Wallace, the new inspector of the East Coast posts, who had come with the steamer.

"A few days after you left, Jean," explained Gillies, "two half-breeds dropped in here with the story that they had travelled up the coast from Rupert House to buy dogs from the Huskies. There were no dogs for sale here, and they seemed pretty sore at missing the York-boat bound south with the dogs bought by the Company for East Main and Fort George. Why, we didn't know, for they couldn't get any of those dogs. They were a weazel-faced, mean-looking pair and when Jules found them feeding two of our huskies one day, there was trouble."

"What did they do to you, Jules?" asked Jean, smiling faintly at the big Company bowman.

"What did Jules do to them, you mean," broke in Angus McCain.

"Well," continued Gillies, "we got outside in time to see Jules break his paddle over the head of one and pile into the other who had a knife out and looked mean.

"Then I kicked them out of the post. They left that night with your dog, for the next day at Little Bear Island they passed a canoe of goose-hunters bound for Whale River and the Indians noticed the puppy who seemed to be muzzled and tied."

During the recital, Marcel walked the floor of the trade-house, his blood hot with rage.

"French half-breeds, M'sieu Gillies, or Scotch?" he asked.

"Scotch, Jean, medium sized; one had lost half an ear and the other had a scar on his chin and the first finger gone on his right hand. But you're not going after them, lad; they've two days' start on you and it's August!"

"M'sieu Gillies, I took de *longue traverse* for dat dog. She was de best pup in dees place. I love dat husky, M'sieu. I start to-night."

The import and finality of Jean's words startled his hearers.

"Why, you won't make your trapping-grounds before the freeze-up, if you head down the coast now. You're crazy, man! Besides, they are two days ahead of you, to start with, and with two paddles will keep gaining," objected the factor.

"M'sieu Gillies," the boy ignored the factor's protest, "will you geeve me letter of credit for de Company posts?"

"Why, yes, Jean, you've got three hundred dollars credit here, but, man, stop and think! You can't overhaul those breeds alone, and if they belong in the East Main or Rupert River country they'll be back in the bush by the time you reach the posts, even if you can trail them that far. It's three hundred and fifty miles to Rupert House; you might be a month on the way."

Jean Marcel shook his head doggedly, determination written in the stone-hard muscles of his dark face. Then he suddenly demanded of the factor:

"What would my father, André Marcel, do eef he leeved? Because of de freeze-up would he geeve hees pup to dose dog-stealer? I ask you dat, M'sieu?"

Gillies' honest eyes frankly met the questioner's.

"André Marcel was the best canoeman on this coast, and no man ever did him a wrong who didn't pay." The factor hesitated.

"Well, M'sieu!" demanded Jean.

"André Marcel," Gillies continued, "would have followed the men who stole his dog down this coast and west to the Barren Grounds."

Jules Duroc nodded gravely as he added: "By Gar! André Marcel, he would trail dose men into de muskegs of Hell."

"Well," said Jean, smiling proudly at the encomiums of his father's prowess, "Jean Marcel, hees son, will start to-night."

Argument was futile to dissuade Marcel from his mad venture. His partners of the previous winter who had waited impatiently for his return refused to delay longer their start for Ghost River and left at once.

Then Jules took Marcel aside and quietly talked to him as would a brother.

" Jean, you stay here wid Ma'm'selle Julie till de steamer go. Dat M'sieu Wallace, he sweet on you' girl w'en you were up de coast. You stay till he leeve."

For this Jean had an outward shrug of contempt, but the rumored attentions of Wallace to Julie Breton, during his absence, sickened his heart with fear. Was he to lose her, too, as well as Fleur?

Before supper, at the Mission, Père Breton urged him to return to his trapping grounds and spare himself the toil of a hopeless quest down the coast in the face of the coming winter. Julie was adding her objections to her brother's, when a knock on the door checked her. Her face colored slightly as Jean glanced up, when she turned to the door.

"Bon soir, Monsieur!" she greeted the newcomer, a note of embarrassment in her voice.

"Good evening, Mademoiselle. I hope I'm not late?" And Inspector Wallace entered the room.

The Inspector, a handsome, well-built man of thirty-five, was dressed in the garb of civilization and wore shoes, a rarity at Whale River. Chief of the East Coast posts of the Great Company, he had been sent the year previous, from western Ontario, and put in command of men older in years and experience who had passed their lives in the far north.

And naturally much resentment had manifested itself among the traders. But that the new chief officer looked and acted like a man of ability, the disgruntled factors had been forced to admit.

As Wallace sat conversing of the great world outside with Père Breton, who was evidently much pleased by his attentions to Julie, he seemed to Jean Marcel to embody all that the young Frenchman lacked. How, indeed, he asked himself, could he now aspire to the love of Julie Breton when so great a man chose to smile upon her?

Wallace seemed surprised at the presence of a humble Company hunter as a member of the priest's family, but Père Breton privately informed him that Jean was as a son and brother at the Mission.

While the black eyes of Julie flashed in response to the admiring glances of Wallace, Jean Marcel ate in silence his last meal at Whale River for many a long week, torn by his longing for the dog carried down the coast in the canoe of the thieves and by the hopelessness of his love for this girl who was manifestly thrilling to the compliments of a man who knew the world of men and cities, who had seen many women, yet found this rose of the north fair. But as he ate in silence, the young Frenchman made a vow that should this man, who was taking her from him, treat her innocence lightly, Inspector though he was, he should feel the cold steel of the knife of Jean Marcel.

After the meal, as Jean prepared to leave, Père Breton renewed his protests against the trip, but in vain. If he had luck, Marcel insisted, he could beat the " freeze-up " home; if not, he would travel up the coast, later, on the ice, or—well, it did not much matter what became of Jean Marcel.

So, with the letter of the factor, on which he could draw supplies at the southern posts, Jean Marcel shook the hands of his friends and, sliding his canoe into the ebb tide, started south as the dying sun gilded the flat Bay to the west. He waved his hand in farewell to the group of Company men on the shore, when he saw above them the figures of Julie Breton and the priest. As Julie held aloft something white, she and her brother were joined by a man. It was Inspector Wallace. Jean swung his paddle to and fro, in response to Julie's God-speed, then dropping to his knees, drove the craft swiftly down-stream on the long pursuit which might take him four hundred miles down the coast to the white-waters of the great Rupert and beyond, he knew not where. And with him he carried the thought that Julie, his Julie, would daily, for a week, see this great man of the Company. It was a heavy heart that Marcel that night took down to the sea.

With the vision of Fleur, strangely sensing the impending separation from her master, as her wail of despair rose from the stockade the night he left her to go north, constantly before his eyes, Jean Marcel reached the coast and turned south. The thought of his puppy muzzled and bound in the canoe two days ahead of him lent power to every lunge of his paddle. While the knowledge that, back at Whale River, instead of walking the river shore in the long twilight with Jean Marcel, as he had dreamed, Julie would have Wallace at her side, added to the viciousness of his stroke. The sea was flat and when at daylight he saw looming ahead the shores of Big Island, he knew he had won a deserved rest, so went ashore, cooked some food and slept.

CHAPTER VII

THE LONG TRAIL TO THE SOUTH COAST

A DAY'S hard paddle past Big Island the dreaded Cape of the Four Winds thrust its bold buttresses far out into the sea toward the White Bear, and Marcel knew that wind here meant days of delay, for no canoe could round this grim headland feared by all *voyageurs,* except in fair weather. So, after a few hours' sleep, he toiled all day down the coast and at midnight had put the gray cape behind him.

Two days later when Marcel went ashore on the Isle of Graves of the Esquimos, to boil his kettle, he found, to his delight, a Fort George goose-boat on the same errand. The Crees who had just left the post to shoot the winter's supply of gray and snowy geese, or "wavies," as they are called from their resemblance in flight to a white banner waving in the sun, had met, two nights before off the mouth of Big River, the canoe he was following. The dog-thieves, who were strangers, did not stop at the post, but had continued south.

With two paddles they were not holding their lead, he laughed to himself, but were coming back.

If he hurried he would overhaul them before they reached Rupert. He did not know the Rupert River, and if once they started inland he would be caught by the "freeze-up" in a strange country, so he continued on late into the night.

Then followed day after day of endless toil at the paddle, for he knew he must travel while the weather held. He could not hope to make Rupert, or even East Main before the wind changed; which might mean idling for days on a beach pounded by seas in which no canoe could live. At times, with a stern breeze, he rigged a piece of canvas to a spruce pole and sailed. But one thought dominated him as mile after mile of the gray East Coast slid past; the thought of having his puppy once more in his canoe, fretting at the gulls and ducks and geese, as he headed north.

Only through necessity did he stop to shoot geese, whose gray and white legions were gathering on the coast for the annual migration. At dawn the "gou-luk!" of the gray ganders marshalling their families out to the feeding grounds, which once sent his blood leaping, now left him cold. He was hunting bigger game, and his heart hungered for his puppy, beaten and half-starved, in all likelihood, travelling somewhere ahead down that bleak coast in the canoe of two men who did not know that close on their heels followed an enemy as dogged, as relent-less, as a wolf on the trail of an old caribou abandoned by the herd.

And so, after days of ceaseless dip and swing, dip and swing, which at night left his back and arms stiff and his fingers numb, Jean Marcel turned into the mouth of the East Main River and paddled up to the post, where he learned that the canoe of the half-breeds had not been seen, and that no hunters of their description traded there. So he turned again to the Bay and headed south for Rupert House. Off the Wild Geese Islands he met what he had for days been dreading, the first September north-wester, and was driven ashore. For the following three days he rested and hunted geese, and when the storm whipped itself out, went on, and at last, crossing Boatswain's Bay, rounded Mount Sherrick and paddled up Rupert Bay to the famous old post, which, since the days of the Merry Monarch and his favorite, Prince Rupert, the first Governor of the "Company of Merchants-Adventurers trading into Hudson's Bay," has guarded the river mouth—an uninterruped history of two centuries and a half of fair dealing with the red fur-hunters of Rupert Land.

"So you're the son of André Marcel? Well, well! Time does fly! Why, André and I made many a camp together in the old days. There was a man, my lad!"

Jean straightened his wide shoulders in pride at this praise of his father by Alec Cameron, factor at Rupert. When he had explained the object of his long journey south in the fall, the latter raised his bushy eyebrows in amazement.

"You mean to tell me that you paddled from Whale River in fifteen days, after a dog?"

"Oui, M'sieu Cameron."

"Well, you didn't waste the daylight or the moon either. You're sure a son of André Marcel. It must be a record for a single paddle; and all for a pup, eh?"

"Oui, all for a pup!"

"You deserve to get that dog. Now, these half-breeds you describe dropped in here in June behind the Mistassini brigade, and traded their fur. Then they started north after dogs."

"Dey were onlee a day ahead of me up de coast."

"Queer I haven't seen 'em here yet. Pierre!" Cameron called to a Company man passing the trade-house. "Have those two Mistassini strangers who went north in June, got back yet?"

"No, but Albert meet dem in Gull Bay two day back. Dey have one pup dey trade from Huskee!"

"There you are, Marcel! Your men crossed over to Hannah Bay to hunt geese. They'll be here in a week or two on their way up-river. You wait here and we'll get your dog when they show up."

"T'anks, M'sieu Cameron!" The dark eyes of Jean Marcel snapped. At last he was closing in on his quarry. "I weel go to Hannah Bay now and get my dog."

"Two to one, lad! They may get the best of you, and I've no men to spare; they're all away goose hunting. You'd better wait here."

"M'sieu, André Marcel would go alone and tak' his dog. I, hees son, also weel tak' mine."

"Good Lord! André Marcel would have skinned them alive—those two. Well, good luck, Jean! but I don't like your tackling those breeds alone."

Jean shook hands with the factor.

"Bon-jour, M'sieu Cameron, and t'anks!"

"If you don't drop in here on your way back, give my regards to Gillies and his family, and be careful," said the factor as Marcel left him.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MEETING IN THE MARSHES

Two days later, after rounding Point Comfort, Marcel was crossing the mud flats of Gull Bay. At last the stalk was on, for somewhere in the vast marshes of the Hannah Bay coast, camped the men he had followed four hundred miles to meet face to face and fight for his dog. Somewhere ahead, through the gray mist, back in the juniper and alder scrub beyond the wide reaches of tide-flats and goose-grass, was Fleur, a prisoner.

That night in camp at East Point, while he cleaned the action and bore of his rifle, the clatter of the geese in the muskeg behind the far lines of spruce edging the marshes, filled him with wonder. Never on the bold East Coast had he heard such a din of geese gathering for the long flight. At dawn, for it was windy, lines of gray Canadas passing overhead bound out to the shoals, waked him with their clamor. The tide was low, and he carried his canoe across the mud-flats through flocks of plover, snipe and yellow-legs, feeding behind the ebb, while teal and black-duck swarmed along the beaches.

As he poled his canoe south through the shoals, he recalled the tales his father had told him of the marshes of Hannah Bay, the greatest breeding ground of the gray goose and black duck in all the wide north. Everywhere along the bars and sand-spits the gray Canadas were idling, always with an erect, keen-eyed sentinel on guard. Farther out, white islands of snowy geese flashed in the sun, as here and there a "wavy" rose on the water to flap his black-tipped wings. Just in from their Arctic breeding-grounds, they were lingering for a month's feast on toothsome south-coast goose-grass before seeking their winter home on the great Gulf two thousand miles away.

Slowly throughout the morning Marcel travelled along the mud-flats bared for miles by the retreating tide. At times the breeze carried to his ears the faint sound of firing, but there were goose-boats from Moose and Rupert House on the coast, and it meant little. That night as the tide covered the marshes he ran up a channel of the Harricanaw delta seeking a camp-ground on its higher shores.

Landing he was looking for driftwood for his fire when suddenly he stopped.

"Ah! You have been here, my friends."

In the soft mud of the shore ran the clearly marked tracks of a man and dog. The footprints of the dog seemed large for Fleur, but Marcel had not seen her in six weeks and the puppy was growing fast.

"Fleur!" he said aloud, "will you remember Jean Marcel after all these weeks with them?"

He had seen no smoke of a fire and the tracks were at least two days old. His men were doubtless on the west shore of the bay where the water for miles inland to the spruce networked the marshes, and the rank grass grew to the height of a man's head; but he would find them. The guns of the hunters would betray their whereabouts.

He drew a long breath of relief. At last he had reached the end of the trail. He could now come to grips with his enemies. To the thief, the law of the north is ruthless, and ruthlessly Jean Marcel was prepared to exact, if need be, the last drop of the blood of these men in payment for this act. It was now his nerve and wit against theirs, with Fleur as the stake. The blood of André Marcel and the *coureurs-de-bois,* which stirred in his veins, was hot for the fight which the days would bring.

Before dawn Jean was taking advantage of the high tide, and when the first light streaked the east, was well on his way. As the sun lifted over the muskeg behind the bay he saw, hanging in the still air, the smoke of a fire.

Quickly turning inshore, he ran his canoe up a waterway and into the long grass. There he waited until the tide went out, listening to the faint reports of the guns of the hunters. At noon, having eaten some cold goose and bannock, he took his rifle and started back over the marsh. Slowly he worked his way, keeping to the cover of the grass and alders, circling around the wide, open spaces, pock-marked with water-holes and small ponds.

Knowing that the breeds would not take the dog with them to their blinds but would tie her up, he planned to stalk the camp up-wind, in order not to alarm Fleur, who might betray his presence to his enemies if by accident they were in camp, in the afternoon, when the geese were moving. After that—well, he should see.

At last he lay within sight of the tent, which was pitched on a tongue of high ground running out into the rush-covered mud-flats. The camp was deserted. His eyes strained wistfully for the sight of the shaggy shape of his puppy. Pain stabbed at his heart. She was not there. What could it mean? Distant shots from the marsh to the west marked the absence of at least one of the breeds. But where was Fleur?

Marcel was too "bush-wise" to take any chances. Still keeping to cover, he made his approach up-wind until he lay within a stone's throw of the tent, when a shift in the breeze warned a pair of keen nostrils that some living thing skulked not far off.

The heart of Jean Marcel leaped as the howl of Fleur betrayed his presence, for huskies never bark. Grasping his rifle, he waited. The uproar of the dog brought no response. The breeds were both away. Rising, he ran to the excited puppy lashed to a stake back of the tent.

"Fleur! *Ma petite chienne!*" Dropping his rifle, he approached his dog with outstretched arms. With flattened ears, the puppy crouched, growling at the stranger, her mane bristling.

"Fleur! Don't you know me, pup?" continued Marcel in soothing tones, holding out his hand.

The puppy's ears went forward. She sniffed long at the hand that had once caressed her. Slowly the growl died in her throat.

"Fleur! Fleur! My poor puppy! Don't you remember Jean Marcel?"

Again the puzzled dog drew deep whiffs through her black nostrils. Back in her brain memory was at work. Slowly the soothing tones of the voice of Marcel stirred the ghosts of other days; vague hints, blurred by the cruelty of weeks, of a time when the hand of a master caressed her and did not strike, when a voice called to her as this voice—then another sniff, and she knew. With a whimper her warm tongue licked his hand, and Jean Marcel had his puppy in his arms. Mad with joy, the yelping husky strained at her rawhide bonds as her anxious master examined a great lump on her head, and her ribs, ridged with welts from kick and blow.

"So they tied her up and beat her, my Fleur? Well, she not leave Jean Marcel again. W'ere he go, Fleur go!"

Suddenly in his ears were hissed the words:

"W'at you do wid dat dog?" And a fierce blow on the back of the head hurled the kneeling Marcel flat on his face.

For a space he lay stunned, his numbed senses blurred beyond thought or action. Then, as his dazed brain cleared, the realization that life hung on his presence of mind, for he would receive no mercy from the thieves, held him limp on the ground as though unconscious.

Snarling curses at the crumpled body of his victim, the half-breed was busy with the joining of some rawhide thongs. Then Jean's dizziness faded. Cautiously he raised an eyelid. The breed was bending over him with a looped thong. Not a muscle moved as the Frenchman waited. Nearer leaned the thief. He reached to slip the looped rawhide over one of Marcel's outstretched hands, when, with a lunge from the ground, the arms of the latter clamped on his legs like a sprung trap. With a wrench, the surprised thief was thrown heavily.

Cat-like, the hunter was on his man, bearing him down. And then began a battle in which quarter was neither asked nor given. Heavier but slower than the younger man, the thief vainly sought to reach Marcel's throat, for the Frenchman's arms, having the under grip, blocked the half-breed from Jean's knife and his own. Over and over they rolled, locked together; so evenly matched in strength that neither could free a hand. Near them yelped Fleur, frantic with excitement, plunging at her stake.

Then the close report of a gun sounded in Marcel's startled ears. A great fear swept him. The absent thief was working back to camp. It was a matter of minutes. Was it to this that he had toiled down the coast in search of his dog—a grave in the Harricanaw mud? And the face of Julie Breton flashed across his vision.

Desperate with the knowledge that he must win quickly, if at all, he strained until the fingers of his left hand reached the haft of the breed's knife. But a twinge shot through his shoulder like the stab of steel, as the teeth of his enemy crunched into his flesh, and he lost his grip. Maddened by pain, Marcel wrenched his right arm free and had his own knife before the fingers of the thief closed on his wrist, holding the blade in the sheath. Then began a duel of sheer strength. For a time the straining arms lifted and pushed, at a dead lock. With veins swelling on neck and forehead, Marcel fought to unsheath his knife; but the half-breed's arm was iron, and did not give. Again a gun was fired—still nearer the camp.

With help at hand, the thief, safe so long as he held his grip, snarled in triumph in the ear of his trapped enemy. But his peril only increased the Frenchman's strength. The fighting blood of the Marcels boiled in his veins. With a fierce heave of the shoulders the hand gripping the knife moved upward. The arm of the thief gave way, only to straighten. Then with a wrench that would not be denied, Jean tore the blade from the sheath.

Frantically now, the breed, white with sudden fear, fought the sinewy wrist, advancing inexorably, on its grim mission. In short jerks, Marcel hunched the knife toward its goal. As he weakened, the knotted features of the one who felt death creeping to him, inch by inch, went gray. The hand fighting Marcel's wrist dripped with sweat. Panting hoarsely, like a beast at bay, the thief twisted and writhed from the pitiless steel. Then in his ears rang the voice of the approaching hunter.

With a cry of despair, the doomed half-breed called to the man who had come too late. Already the knuckles of Marcel were high on his ribs. With a final wrench, the blade was lunged home.

The cry was smothered in a cough. The man who had beaten his last puppy gasped, quivered convulsively; then lay still.

Bathed in sweat, shaking from the strain and exertion of the long battle, Marcel got stiffly to his feet and seized his rifle. Again the camp was hailed from the marsh. It was evident that the goose-hunter had not sensed the cry of his partner or he would not have betrayed his position. Doubtless he was poling up a reed-masked waterway with a load of geese.

Jean smiled grimly, for the thief would have only his shotgun loaded with fine shot, for large shot is not used for geese in the north. Hurriedly searching the tent, he found a rifle which he threw into the rushes; then loosed Fleur.

The half-breed was in his power, but he wanted no prisoner. To stay and beat this man as Fleur had been beaten would have been sweet, but of blood he had had enough. For an instant his eyes rested on the ghastly evidence of his visit, awaiting the return of the hunter; then he took Fleur and started across the marsh for his canoe.

To the dead man, who, to the theft of Fleur would have lightly added the death of her master, Marcel gave no thought. As for the other, when he found his dead partner, fear of an ambush would prevent him from following their trail.

Reaching his canoe, Jean divided a goose with Fleur and, when it became dark, started for East Point. That the half-breed's partner might attempt to follow him and seek revenge, he had no doubt, but with the shotgun alone, for Jean had taken the only rifle at their camp, the thief's sole chance would be to stalk Marcel while he slept. However, as the sea was flat and the tide ebbing, Marcel was confident that daylight would find him well up the coast toward Point Comfort.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE TEETH OF THE WINDS

It was the first week in September. This meant a race with the "freeze-up" into Whale River, for with the autumn headwinds, it would take him a month, travel as he might. Though he sorely needed geese for food on his way north, there was no time to waste at Hannah Bay, so Marcel paddled steadily all night. At dawn, in the mist off Gull Bay, Fleur became so restless with the scent of the shoals of geese, which the canoe was raising, that Jean was forced to put a gag of hide in her mouth while he drifted with the tide on the "wavies" and shot a week's supply of food.

At daylight he went ashore, concealed his canoe behind some boulders, and trusting to Fleur's nose and ears to guard him from surprise, slept the sleep of exhaustion. Later, while his breakfast was cooking, Jean revelled in his reunion with his dog. In the weeks since he had last seen her she had fairly leaped in height and weight. Food had been plenty with the half-breeds and Fleur was not starved, but his blood boiled at the evidence she bore of the breeds' brutality. He now regretted that he had not ambushed the confederate of the man he had beaten, and branded him, also, as the puppy had been marked.

Though Fleur was but six months old, the heavy legs and already massive lines of her head gave promise of a maturity, unusual, even in the Ungava breed. Some day, mused Marcel, as Fleur looked her love of the master through her slant, brown eyes, her head on his knee, he would have a dog-team equal to the famous huskies of his grandfather, Pierre Marcel, who once took the Christmas mail from Albany to Fort Hope, four hundred and fifty miles, over a drifted trail, in twelve days.

"Yes, some day Fleur will give Jean Marcel a team," he said aloud, and rubbed the gray ears while Fleur's hairy throat rumbled in delight as though she were struggling to answer: "Some day, Jean Marcel; for Fleur will not forget how you came from the north and brought her home." And then the muscles of his lean face twisted with pain as he went on: "But who will there be to work for with Julie gone?"

That day, holding the nose of his canoe on Mount Sherrick, Jean crossed the mouth of Rupert Bay and headed up the coast. In three days he was at East Main, where he bought dried whitefish for Fleur, for huskies thrive on whitefish as on no other food, and salt to cure geese; then started the same night for Fort George. Two days out he was driven ashore by the first north-wester and held prisoner, while he added to his supply of geese, which he salted down.

After the storm he toiled on day after day, praying that the stinging northers bringing the "freeze-up" would hold off until he sighted Whale River. At night, seated beneath the sombre cliffs by his drift-wood fire with Fleur at his side, he often watched the wonder of the Northern Lights, marvelling at their mystery, as they pulsed and waned and flared again over the sullen Bay, then streamed up across the heavens, and diffusing, veiled the stars, which twinkled through with a mystic blue light. The "Spirits of the Dead at Play," the Esquimos called those dancing phantoms of the skies; and he thought of his own dead and wondered if their spirits were at peace.

And then, as he lay, a blanketed shape beside his sleeping puppy, came dreams to mock him—dreams of Julie Breton, always happy, and beside her, smiling into her face, the handsome Inspector of the East Coast posts. Night after night he dreamed of the girl who was slipping away from him—who had forgotten Jean Marcel in his mad race south for his dog.

On and on he fought his way north through the head-seas, defying cross-winds; landing to empty his canoe, and then on to the lee of the next island. While his boat would live he travelled, for September was drawing to a close and over him hung the menace of the first stinging northers which for days would anchor his frail craft to the beach. Hard on their heels would follow the nipping nights of the "freeze-up," which would shackle the waterways, locking the land in a grip of ice.

Past the beetling shoulders of the Black Whale, past the Earthquake Islands and Fort George he journeyed, for the brant and blue geese were on the coast and he needed no supplies; leaving Caribou Point astern, at last the dreaded Cape of the Four Winds loomed through the mist which blanketed the flat sea.

It was to this gray headland that he had raced the northers which would have held him windbound. And he had won.

Rounding the Cape, in five days he stood, a drawn-faced tattered figure with Fleur at his side, at the door of the Mission House.

"Jean Marcel! Thank God!" and Julie Breton impulsively kissed the lean cheek of the *voyageur*. A whine of protest followed by a smothered rumble at such familiarity with her master drew her glance to the great puppy. "Fleur! You brought Fleur with you, Jean, as you said you would. Oh, we have had much worry about you, Jean Marcel—and how thin you are!"

She led man and dog into the building.

"Henri! Come quick and see whom we have with us!"

"Jean, my son!" cried the priest, embracing the returned *voyageur,* "and you brought back your dog! It will be a brave tale we shall hear to-night!"

The appearance of Marcel and Fleur at the trade-house was greeted with:

"Nom de Dieu! Jean Marcel! And de dog! He return wid hees dog, by Gar!" as Jules Duroc sprang to meet him with a bear hug.

"Welcome back, my lad!" cried Colin Gillies, tearing a hand of Jean from the emotional Company man. While Angus McCain, joining in the chorus of congratulations, was clapping the helpless Marcel on the shoulder, the perplexed puppy, worried by the uproar of strangers about her master, leaped, tearing the back out of McCain's coat, and was relegated by Jean to the stockade outside.

"Well, well, how far did they take you, Jean? Did you have a fuss getting your dog?" asked the factor.

"I was one day behind dem at Rupert Bay ——"

"What, you've been to Rupert?" interrupted the amazed Gillies.

"Oui, M'sieu. I go to Rupert and see M'sieu Cameron."

"And with one paddle you gained a day on them? Lad, you've surely got your father's staying power. Where did you come up with them?"

Then Jean related the details of his capture of Fleur to an open-mouthed audience.

"So there's one less dog-stealer on the Bay," drily commented Gillies, when Marcel had finished his grim tale.

"Why you not put de bullet een dat oder t'ief, Jean?" demanded the bloodthirsty Jules.

"Eet ees not easy to keel a man, onless he steal your dog an' try to keel you. I had de dog. One of dem was enough," gravely answered the trapper.

"That's right; you had your dog which I thought you'd never see again," approved Gillies. "But your travelling this time of year, with the head-winds and sea, up the coast in thirty days, beats me. I was five weeks, once, making it with two paddles. You must have your father's back, lad. It was the best on this coast in his day; and you've surely got his fighting blood."

Basking for three days in the hospitality of the Mission; resting from the strain and wear of six weeks' constant toil at the paddle, Marcel revelled in Julie's good cooking. To watch her trim figure moving about the house; to talk to her while her dusky head bent over her sewing, after the loneliness of his long journey, would have been all the heaven he asked, had it not been that over it all hung the knowledge that Julie Breton was lost to him. Kind she was as a sister is kind, but her heart he knew was far in the south at East Main in the keeping of Inspector Wallace, to do with it as his manhood prompted. And knowing what he did, Marcel kept silence.

On his return he had learned the story from big Jules. All Whale River had watched the courting of Julie. All Whale River had seen Wallace and the girl walking nightly in the long twilight, and had shaken their heads sadly, in sympathy with the lad who was travelling down the coast on the mad quest of his puppy. Yes, he had lost her. It was over, and he manfully fought the bitterness and despair that was his; tried to forget the throbbing pain at his heart, as he made the most of those three short days with the girl he loved, and might never see again, as a girl, for Marcel was not returning from the Ghost at Christmas.

His dreams were dead. Ambitions for the future had been stripped from him, as the withering winds strip a tree of leaves. The home he had pictured at Whale River when, in the spring, he fought through to the Salmon for a dog-team which should make his fortune, was now a phantom. There was nothing left him but the love of his puppy. She would never desert Jean Marcel.

But Jean Marcel was a trapper, and the precious days before the ice would close the upper Whale and the Ghost to canoe travel were slipping past. Before he went south his partners of the previous winter had agreed to take with them the supplies, which he had drawn from the post, but that they would not net fish for his dog he was certain. Exasperated at his determination to go south, they would hardly plan for the dog they were confident he would not recover.

So Marcel bade his friends good-bye and with as much cured whitefish as he could carry without being held up on the portages by extra trips, started with Fleur on the long up-river trail to his trapping grounds.

When he left, he said to Julie in French: "I have not spoken to you of what I have heard since my return."

The girl's face flushed but her eyes bravely met his.

"They tell me that you are to marry M'sieu Wallace," he hazarded.

"They do not know, who tell you that!" she exclaimed with spirit. "M'sieu Wallace has not asked me to marry him, and beside, he is still a Protestant."

Ignoring the evasion, he went on slowly: "But you love him, Julie; and he is a great man ——"

"Ah, Jean," she broke in, "you are hurt. But you will always be my friend, won't you?"

"Yes, I shall always be that." And he was gone.

CHAPTER X

THE CAMP ON THE GHOST

ALTHOUGH the stinging winds with swirls of fine snow were already driving down the valleys, and nightly the ice filmed the eddies and the backwaters, yet the swift river remained open to the speeding canoe until, one frosty morning, Marcel waked in camp at the Conjuror's Falls to find that the ice had over-night closed in on the quiet reaches of the Ghost just above, shackling the river for seven months against canoe travel.

Caching his boat and supplies on spruce saplings, he circled each peeled trunk with a necklace of large inverted fish-hooks, to foil the raids of that arch thief and defiler of caches, the wolverine. That night he reached the camp of his partners.

Antoine Beaulieu and Joe Piquet, like Marcel, had lost their immediate families in the plague, and the year before, had been only too glad to join the Frenchman in a trapping partnership of mutual advantage. For while Marcel, son of the former Company head man, with a schooling at the Mission, and a skill and daring as canoeman and hunter, beyond their own, was looked upon as leader by the half-breeds, Antoine was a good hunter, while Joe Piquet's manual dexterity in fashioning snow-shoes, making moccasins and building bark canoes rendered him particularly useful. Marcel's feat of the previous spring in finding the headwaters of the Salmon and his appearance at Whale River with a pure bred Ungava husky, to the amazement of the Crees, had increased his influence with his partners; but his determination to go south after his dog when it was already high time for the three men to start for their trapping-grounds had left them in a sullen mood. Because they could use them, if he did not return from the south, they had packed his supplies over the portages of the Whale and up the Ghost to their camp, but had netted no extra whitefish for the dog they felt he would not bring home.

That night they sat long over the fire in the shack they had built the autumn previous, listening to Marcel's tale of the rescue of Fleur and of the great goose grounds of the south coast.

In the morning Jean waked with the problem of a supply of fish for Fleur and himself troubling him, for one of the precepts of André Marcel had been, "Save your fish for the tail of the winter, for no one knows where the caribou will be." Down at Conjuror's Falls, he had cached less than two months' rations for his dog, and they were facing seven months of the long snows. To be sure, she could live on meat, if meat was to be had, but a husky thrives on fish, and Marcel determined that she should have it.

Confident of finding game plentiful, his partners, with the usual lack of foresight of the Crees, had netted less than three months' supply of whitefish and lake-trout. This emergency store Marcel knew would be consumed by February, however plentiful the caribou proved to be, for the Crees seldom possess the thrift to save against the possible spring famine. So he determined to set his net at once.

Borrowing Joe's canoe, he packed it through the "bush" to a good fish lake where he set the net under the young ice, and baited lines; then taking Fleur, he started cruising out locations for his trap-lines in new country, far toward the blue hills of the Salmon watershed, where game signs had been thick the previous spring.

Toward the last of October when the snow began to make deep, Fleur's education as a sled-dog began. Already the fast growing puppy was creeping up toward one hundred pounds in weight, and soon, under the kind but firm tutelage of the master, was as keen to be harnessed for a run as a veteran husky of the winter trails.

When he had set and baited his traps over a wide circle of new country to the north, Jean returned to his net and lines, and at the end of ten days had a supply of trout and whitefish for Fleur, which he cached at the lake. On his return, Antoine and Joe derided his labors when the caribou trails networked the muskegs, but Marcel ignored them.

It looked like a good winter for game. Snowshoe rabbits were plentiful and wherever their runways led in and out of the scrub-spruce and fir covers, there those furred assassins of the forest, the fox and the lynx, the fisher and the marten, were sure to make their hunting-grounds. During November and December, when pelts are at their best, the men made a harvest at their traps. The caribou were still on the barrens feeding on the white moss from which they scraped the snow with their large, round-toed hoofs, and the rabbit snares furnished stew whenever the trappers craved a change from caribou steaks. But no Indian will eat rabbit as a regular diet while he can get red meat. This varying hare of the north, which, so often, in the spring, from Labrador to the Yukon, stands between the red trapper and starvation, has a flavor which quickly palls on the taste, and never quite seems to satisfy hunger. The Crees often speak of "starving on rabbits."

During these weeks following the trap-lines, learning the ways of the winter forest after a puppyhood on the coast, as Fleur grew in bulk and strength, so her affection deepened for Jean Marcel. Now nearly a year old, she easily drew the sled loaded with the meat of a caribou into camp, on a beaten trail. At night in the tent Marcel had pitched and banked with snow, as a half-way camp on the round of his trap-lines, she would sit with hairy ears pointed, watching his every movement, looking unutterable adoration as he scraped his pelts, stretching them on frames to dry or mended his clothes and moccasins. Then, before he turned in to his plaited, rabbit-skin blankets, warmer by far than any fur robes known in the north, Fleur invariably demanded her evening romp. Taking a hand in her jaws which never closed, she would lift her lips, baring her white fangs in a snarl of mimic anger, as she swung her head from side to side, until, seizing her, Jean rolled her on her back, while rumbles and growls from her shaggy throat voiced her delight.

Back at the main camp, Fleur, true to her breed, merely tolerated the presence of Antoine and Joe, indifferent to all offers of friendship. Moving away at their approach, she suffered neither of them to place hand upon her. At night she slept outside in the snow, where the thick mat of fine fur under the long hair rendered her immune to cold.

And all these weeks Jean Marcel was fighting out his battle with self. Always, the struggle went ceaselessly on—the struggle with his heart to give up Julie Breton. Reason though he would, that he had nothing to give her, while this great man of the Company had everything, his love for the girl kept alive the embers of hope. He carried the memory of her sweetness over the white trails by day and at night again wandered with her in the twilight as in the days before the figure of Wallace darkened his life.

As Christmas approached, Jean wondered whether Wallace would spend it in Whale River, and was glad that they had not intended, because of the great distance, to go back for the festivities at the post. Should he ever see her again as Julie Breton? he asked himself. Wallace would change his religion. Surely no man would balk at that, to get Julie. And the spring would see them married. Well, he should go on loving her—and Fleur; there was no one else.

CHAPTER XI

THE WARNING IN THE WIND

ONE afternoon toward the end of the year when the early dusk had turned Marcel back toward camp from his most northerly line of marten traps, he suddenly stopped in his tracks on the ridge from which he had seen the lake on the Salmon headwaters the spring previous. Pushing back the hood of his caribou capote to free his ears, he listened, motionless. Beside him, with black nostrils quivering, Fleur sniffed the stinging air.

Again the faint, far, wailing chorus which had checked him, reached Marcel's ears. The dog stiffened, her mane rising as she bared her white fangs.

"You heard it too, Fleur?" muttered the man, softly, resting a rabbit-skin mitten on the broad head of the nervous husky. Marcel gazed long at the floor of snow to the north through wind-whipped ridges.

"Ah-hah!" he exclaimed, "dey turn dees way." Clearer now the stiff breeze carried the call of the hunting wolves. Fleur burst into a frenzy of yelping. Seizing the dog, Marcel calmed her into silence. Then, after an interval, the cry of the pack slowly faded, and shortly, the man's straining ears caught no sound save the fretting of the wind through the spruce.

Wolves he had often heard, singly, and in groups of four and five, but the hunting howl which had been brought to him through the hills by the wind, he knew was not the clamor of a handful of timber-wolves, but the blood chorus of a pack. None but the white-wolves which, far to the north, hung on the flanks of the caribou herds could raise such a hunting cry and there was but one reason for their drifting south from the great Ungava barrens.

It was a sober face that Jean Marcel wore back to his camp. Large numbers of arctic wolves in the country meant the departure of the trapper's chief source of meat—the caribou. With the caribou gone, they had their limited supply of fish, and the rabbits, eked out by the flour, which would not carry them far, for the half-breeds, in spite of his warnings, had already consumed half of it. To be sure, the rabbits would pull them through to the "break-up" of the long snows in April; would keep them from actual starvation. Then he cursed his partners for failing to make themselves independent of meat by netting more fish in September.

"To-morrow," said Marcel, on his return next day to the main camp, "we start for de barren and hunt de deer hard while dey stay in dees countree."

The partners spoke, at times, in French patois and Cree, at times in broken English.

"W'at you say, Jean? I got trap-line to travel to-morrow," objected Antoine Beaulieu.

"I say dis," returned Marcel, commanding the attention of the two men by the gravity of his face. "De deer will not be in dis countree een t'ree—four day."

"Ha! Ha! dat ees good joke, Jean Marcel!" exclaimed Piquet.

"Oui, dat ees good joke!" returned Marcel, rising and shaking a finger in the grinning faces of his partners. "But I say dis to you, Antoine Beaulieu an' Joe Piquet. We go to de barren and hunt deer to-morrow or I tak' my share of flour and mak' my own camp."

Marcel's threat sobered the half-breeds. They had no desire to break with the Frenchman, whose initiative and daring they respected.

"De deer are plentee, I count seexteen to-day," argued Antoine.

"Oui, to-day de deer are here, but, whiff!" Jean waved his hand, "an' dey are gone; for las' night I hear de white wolves, not t'ree or four, but manee, ver' manee, drive de deer in de hills. Dey starve in de nord and come here for meat. To-morrow we go!"

Piquet and Beaulieu readily admitted that the white wolves, if they appeared in numbers, would drive the caribou—called deer, in the north—out of the country, but they insisted that what Jean had heard was the echoing of the call and answer of three or four timber wolves gathering for a hunt. Never in his life had Joe Piquet, who was thirty, heard of arctic wolves appearing on the Great Whale headwaters. Thus they argued, but Jean was obdurate. On the following day the three men started back into the barrens with Fleur and the sled.

CHAPTER XII

THE WORK OF THE WHITE WOLVES

THE first day, by hard hunting they shot three caribou, but to the surprise and chagrin of Antoine and Joe, on the second day, in a country where they had never failed to get meat earlier in the winter, the hunters got but one. After that not a caribou was seen on the wide barrens, while many trails were crossed, all heading south, and following the signs of the fleeing caribou were the tracks of wolves, not singly or in couples, but in packs.

When the hunters had satisfied themselves that the caribou had left the country, they relayed their meat into camp with the help of Fleur and lines attached to the sled to aid her.

That night the trappers took council. The caribou meat, flour and remaining fish, counting Jean's cache at Conjuror's Falls, would take them into February. After that, it would be rabbits through March and April until the fish began to move. In the meantime a few lake trout and pike could be caught with lines through holes in the ice. Also, setting the net under three feet of ice could be accomplished with infinite labor, but the results in midwinter were always a matter of doubt.

"You had all September to net fish, but what did you do? You grew fat on deer meat," flung out Jean bitterly, thinking of his hungry puppy who required nourishing food in these months of rapid growth.

"How much feesh you got in dat cache?" demanded Piquet, ignoring the remark.

"About one hundred fifty pound," replied Marcel.

"Not on Conjur' Fall, I mean at de lac."

The fish Jean had netted and cached at the lake, on arriving in October, were designed for his dog and already had been partly used.

"Only little left at de lac," he replied.

"Dat feesh belong to us all; de dog can leeve on rabbit."

Piquet's remark brought the blood to Jean's face.

"De dog gets her share of feesh, do you hear dat, Joe?" rasped Marcel, his eyes blazing. "You and Antoine got no right to dat feesh; you refuse to help me and you laugh when I net dat feesh. De dog gets her share, Joe Piquet!" Marcel rose, facing the others with a glitter in his eyes that had its effect on Piquet.

"We have bad tam, dees spreeng, for sure," moaned Antoine. "I weesh we net more feesh."

"Well, I tell you what to do," said Jean. "Eef de feesh do not bite tru de ice or come to de net, we travel over to de Salmon, plentee beaver dere."

At the suggestion of moving into the unknown country to the north, with its dread valleys peopled with spirits, the superstitious half-breeds shook their heads. Rather starve on the Whale, they said, than in the haunted valleys where the voices of the Windigo filled the nights with fear.

With a disgusted shrug of his wide shoulders, Marcel dismissed the subject. "All right, starve on de Ghost, de Windigo get you on de Salmon."

With the disappearance of the caribou the partners began setting rabbit snares to save their meat and flour. Jean brought up the last of his fish from Conjuror's Falls but refused to touch his cache at the lake. With strict economy and a liberal diet of rabbit, they decided that their food could carry them into March. Jean wished to keep the flour untouched for emergency, but the half-breeds, characteristically optimistic, counted on a return of the caribou, and they always had rabbit to fall back upon.

During the last week in January while following his trap-lines, Jean made a discovery the gravity of which drove him in haste back to the camp on the Ghost.

"How many long snows since de plague, Joe?" he asked.

His comrades turned startled eyes on the speaker. Piquet slowly counted on his fingers the winters since the last plague all but exterminated the snow-shoe rabbits, then leaping to his feet, cried: "By Gar! eet ees not dees year. No, no! de ole man at de trade said de nex' long snow after dees will be de plague."

"Well, de old men were wrong," Marcel calmly insisted, as his companions paled at the meaning of his words. "Eet ees dees year w'en you net leetle feesh, dat de rabbits die."

"No, eet ees a meestake!" they protested as the lean features of the Frenchman hardened in a bitter smile.

"On de last trip to my traps," went on the imperturbable Marcel, "I find four rabbit dead from de plague an' since de last snow I cross few fresh tracks."

"I fin' none een two days myself," echoed Antoine.

The stark truth of Marcel's contention drove itself home. At last, convinced, they gazed with blanched faces into each others' eyes from which looked fear—fear of the dread weeks of the March moon and the slow death which starvation might bring. The grim spectre which ever hovers over the winter camps in the white silences now menaced the shack on the Ghost.

Shortly, fresh rabbit tracks became rare. After years of plenty, the days of lean hunting for lynx and fox had returned. The plague, which periodically sweeps the north, would bring starvation, as well, to many a tepee of the improvident children of the snows.

CHAPTER XIII

POOR FLEUR

As the weeks went by, the food cache at the camp on the Ghost steadily shrank. The nets under the ice and the set-lines were now bringing no fish. More and more Jean slept in his half-way camp ten miles north, for although the short rations he fed Fleur had been obtained solely by his own efforts, Joe and Antoine objected to the well-nourished look of the puppy while they grew thin and slowly weakened. But, for generations, the huskies have been accustomed to starvation, and if not slaving with the sleds, will for weeks show but slight effect from short rations. Besides, Fleur had, from necessity and instinct, become a hunter, and many a ptarmigan and stray rabbit she picked up foraging for herself.

To increase the difficulty of hunting for food, January had brought blizzard after blizzard, piling deep with drifts the trails to their trap-lines, which they still visited regularly, for the starved lynxes were coming to the bait of the flesh of their kin in greater and greater numbers. Twice, seeking the return of the caribou, the desperate men travelled far into the barrens beaten by the withering January winds, returning with wind-burned, frost-blackened faces, for no man may face for long the needle-pointed scourge of the midwinter northers off the Straits.

Finally, in desperation, when the flour was gone, and the food cache held barely enough meat and fish for two weeks, Joe and Antoine insisted that, while they had food to carry them through, they make for the post.

" You can crawl into de post lak a starving Cree because you were too lazy to net feesh. I will stay in de bush with my dog," was Jean's scornful reply.

But the situation was desperate. With two months remaining before the big thaw in April, when they could rely on plenty of fish, there seemed but one alternative, unless the caribou returned or the fish began to move. A few trout and an occasional rabbit and ptarmigan would not keep them alive until the " break-up," when the bear would leave their " washes " and the caribou start north. Already with revolting stomachs they had begun to eat starved lynx. If only they could get beaver, but there were no beaver on the Ghost. It was clear that they must find game shortly or retreat to Whale River.

One night Jean reached his fish cache on his return from a three days' hunt toward the Salmon waters. At last he had found beaver, and caching two at his tent, with his heart high with hope, was bringing the carcasses of three more to his partners. As he approached the cache in the gathering dusk, to his surprise he found the fresh tracks of snow-shoes.

"Ah-hah!" he muttered, his mouth twisted in a grim smile, "so dey rob de cache of Jean Marcel while he travel sixty mile to get dem beaver!"

The last of Fleur's pitiful little store of fish was gone. The cache was stripped.

Jean shook his head sadly. So he could no longer trust these men whose hunger had made them thieves, he mused. Well, he would break with them at once. "Poor Fleur!" He patted the sniffing nose of his dog.

Bitter with the discovery, Marcel drove Fleur over the trail to the camp. Opening the slab-door he surprised the half-breeds gorging themselves from a steaming kettle of trout. But hunger had driven them past all sense of shame. Looking up sullenly, they waited for him to speak.

"Bon soir, my friends! I see you have had luck at de lines," he surprised them with. "I have three nice fat beaver for you."

The hollow eyes of Joe and Antoine met in a questioning look. Then Piquet brazened it out.

"Beaver, eh? Dat soun' good, fat beaver!" and he smacked his thin lips greedily.

"W'ere you get beaver, Jean?" asked Antoine, now that the tension due to Jean's appearance had relaxed.

"W'ere I tell you I would fin' dem, nord, een de valley of de spirits," he laughed.

Marcel heaped a tin dish from the kettle, and slipping outside, fed Fleur.

"Here, Fleur!" he called, "ees some of feesh dat Joe has boiled for you. W'at, you lak' eet bettair raw? Well, Joe he lak' eet boiled."

Returning, Jean ate heartily of the lake trout. When he had finished and lighted his pipe, he said: "You weel fin' de beaver on de cache. I leeve een de morning for Salmon riviere country."

"W'at, you goin' leave us, Jean?" cried Antoine visibly disturbed.

"Oui, I don't trap wid t'ief!" The cold eyes of Marcel bored into those of Beaulieu which wavered and fell. But Piquet accepted the challenge.

"W'at you t'ink, Jean Marcel, you geeve dose feesh to de dog w'en we starve?" he sullenly demanded. "We eat de dog, also, before we starve."

"You eat de dog, eh, Joe Piquet? Dat ees good joke. You 'av' to keel de dog and Jean Marcel first, my frien'," sneered Marcel. "I net feesh for my dog and you not help me but laugh; now you tak' dem from my dog. Bien! I am tru wid you both! I geeve you de beaver and bid you, bon jour, tomorrow!"

Antoine was worried, for he knew too well what the loss of Marcel would mean to them in the days to come. But the sullen Piquet in whom toil and starvation were bringing to the surface traits common to the half-breed, treated Marcel's going with seeming indifference.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MARK OF THE BREED

Deep in the night, Marcel waked cold. Lifting his head from the blankets, his face met an icy draft driving through the open door of the shack which framed a patch of sky swarming with frozen stars.

Wondering why the door was open, he rose to close it, when the starlight fell on Piquet's empty bunk.

"Ah-hah! Joe he steal some more, maybe!" he muttered, hastily drawing on his moccasins.

Then stepping into the thongs of his snow-shoes which stood in the snow beside the door, he hurried to the cache.

Beneath the food scaffold crouched a dark form.

"So you steal my share of de meat and hide eet, before I go, eh? You t'ief!"

Caught in the act, Piquet rose from the provision bags as Marcel reached him, to take full in the face a blow backed by the concentrated fury of the Frenchman. Reeling back against a spruce support to the cache, the dazed half-breed sank to his snow-shoes, then, slowly struggling to his knees, lunged wildly with his knife at the man sneering down at him. Missing, Piquet's thrust carried him head-first into the snow, his arms buried to the shoulders. In a flash, Marcel fell on the prostrate breed with his full weight, driving both knees hard into Piquet's back. With a smothered grunt the half-breed lay limp in the snow.

"Get up, Antoine!" called Marcel, returning to the shack with Fleur, who had left her bed under a spruce, "you fin' a cache-robber, widout fur on heem, out dere. I tak' my grub an' go."

"W'ere ees Joe?" asked the confused Beaulieu, rubbing his eyes.

"Joe, he got w'at t'ieves deserve. Go an' see."

Antoine appeared shortly, followed by the muttering Piquet.

"Ah, bo'-jo', M'sieu Carcajou! You have wake up," Jean jeered.

One of Piquet's beady eyes was swollen shut, but the other snapped evilly as he limped to his bunk.

Taking his share of the food, Marcel loaded his sled, hitched Fleur, then looked into the shack, where he found the two men arguing excitedly.

"A'voir, Antoine! Better hide your grub or M'sieu Wolverine weel steal eet w'ile you sleep."

With an oath, Piquet was on his feet with his knife, but Beaulieu hurled him back on his bunk and held him, as he cursed the man who stood coolly in the doorway, sneering at the helpless breed blocked in his attempt at revenge.

"A'voir, Antoine!" Jean repeated, as the troubled face of Beaulieu turned to the old partner he respected, "don' let de carcajou keel you for de grub." And ignoring the proffered hand of the hunter who followed him out to the sled, took the trail north.

As dawn broke blue over the bald ridges to the east, Marcel raised his set-lines and net at the lake and pushed on toward the silent hills of the Salmon headwaters.

CHAPTER XV

FOR LOVE OF A MAN

It had been with the feeling of a heavy load loosed from his shoulders that the Frenchman left the Ghost. Disgusted with the laziness and lack of foresight of his partners in the autumn; through the strain and worry of the winter he had gradually lost all confidence in their capacity to fight through until spring brought back the fishing; and now this robbery of his cache and the affair with Piquet had made him a free man.

For Antoine, the friend of his youth, ever easily led but at heart, honest enough, he held only feelings of disgust; but with the crooked-souled Piquet, henceforth it should be war to the knife. Knowing that there were more beaver in the white valleys of the Salmon country, Marcel faced with hope the March crust and the long weeks of the April thaws, when rotting ice would bar the waterways and soggy snow, the trails, to all travel. Somehow, he and Fleur would pull through and see Julie Breton and Whale River again. Somehow, they would live, but it meant a dogged will and day after day, many a white mile of drudgery for himself and the dog he loved. Crawl starved and beaten into Whale River—caught like a mink in a trap by the pinch of the pitiless snows—no Marcel ever did, and he would not be the first.

The February dusk hung in the spruce surrounding the half-way camp of Marcel beside a pond in the hills dividing the watershed of the Ghost from the Salmon. For three days Jean had been picking up his traps preparatory to making the break north to the beaver country. With a light load, for Fleur could not haul much over her weight on a freshly broken trail in the soft snow, the toboggan-sled stood before the tent ready for an early start under the stars. From the smoke-hole of the small tepee the sign of cooking rose straight into the biting air, for there was no wind. But the half-ration of trout and beaver which was simmering in the kettle would leave the clamoring stomach of the man unsatisfied. With the three beaver he had brought from the north and the fish and caribou from the Ghost, Marcel still had food for himself and his dog for a fortnight, but he was not an Indian and was husbanding his scanty store. Fleur had already bolted her fish, more supper than her master allowed himself, for Fleur was still growing fast and her need was greater.

Disliking the smoke from the fire which often filled the tepee, Fleur slept outside under the low branches of a fir, and when it snowed, waked warm beneath a white blanket. For, enured to the cold, the husky knows no winter shelter and needs none, sleeping curled, nose in bushy tail, in a hole dug in the snow, through the bitter nights without frost bite.

As the dusk slowly blanketed the forest, here and there stars pricked out of the dark canopy of sky to light gradually the white hills rolling away north to the dread valleys of the forbidden land of the Crees. Later, as the night deepened, the Milky Way drew its trail across the swarming stars. In the pinch of the strengthening cold, spruce and jack-pine snapped in the encircling forest, while the ice of lake and river, contracting, boomed intermittently, like the shot of distant artillery.

On the northern horizon, the camp-fires of the giants flickered and glowed, fitfully; then, at length, loosing their bonds, snake-like ribbons of light writhed and twisted from the sky-line to the high heavens, in grotesque traceries; and across the white wastes of the polar stage swept the eyrie "Dance of the Spirits."

For a space Jean stood outside the tepee watching the never-ceasing wonder of the aurora; then sending Fleur to her bed, sought his blankets. But no sting of freezing air might keep the furred and feathered marauders of the night from their hunting; for faintly on the tense silence floated the "hoo-hoo!" of the snowy owl, patrolling the haunts of the wood-mice. Out of the murk of a cedar swamp rose the scream of a starving lynx. Presently, over star-lit ridges drifted the call of a mating timber wolf.

The Northern Lights had dimmed and faded. Sentinel stars alone guarded the white solitudes, when, from the gloom of the spruce out into the lighted snow moved a dark shape. Noiselessly the muffled racquettes of the skulker advanced. As the figure crept nearer the tent, it suddenly stopped, frozen into rigidity, head forward, as though listening. After a space, it stirred again. Something held in the hands glinted in the starlight, like steel. It was the action of a rifle, made bright by wear.

When the creeping shape reached the banking of the tepee, again it stopped, stiff as a spruce. The seconds lengthened into minutes. Then a hand reached out to the canvas. In the hand was a knife. Slowly the keen edge sawed at the frozen fabric. At last the tent was slit.

Leaning forward the hunter of sleeping men enlarged the opening and pressed his face to the rent. Long he gazed into the darkened tepee. Then withdrawing his hooded head, he shook it slowly as if in doubt. Finally, as though decided on his course, he thrust the barrel of his rifle through the opening and dropped his head as if to aim; when, from the rear a gray shape catapulted into his back, flattening him on the snow. As the weight of the dog struck the crouching assassin, his rifle exploded inside the tent, followed by a scream of terror.

Again and again the long fangs of the husky slashed at the throat of the writhing thing in the snow. Again and again the massive jaws snapped and tore, first the capote, then the exposed neck, to ribbons. Then with cocked rifle the dazed Marcel, waked by the gun fired in his ears, reached them.

With difficulty dragging his dog from the crumpled shape, Marcel looked, and from the bloodied face grimacing horribly in death above the mangled throat, stared the glazed eyes of Joe Piquet.

"By Gar! You travel far for de grub and de *revanche,* Joe Piquet," he exclaimed. Turning to the dog, snarling with hate of the prowling thing she had destroyed, Jean led her away.

"Fleur, ma petite!" he cried, "she took good care of Jean Marcel while he sleep. Piquet, he thought he keel us both in de tent. He nevaire see Fleur under de fir." The great dog trembling with the heat of battle, her mane stiff, yelped excitedly. "She love Jean Marcel, my Fleur; and what a strength she has!" Rearing, Fleur placed her massive fore-paws on Marcel's chest, whining up into his face; then seizing a hand in her jaws, proudly drew him back to the dead man in the snow. There, raising her head, as if in warning to all enemies of her master, she sent out over the white hills the challenging howl of the husky.

When Jean Marcel had buried the frozen body of Joe Piquet in a drift over the ridge, where the April thaws would betray him to the mercy of his kind, the forest creatures of tooth and beak and claw, he started back to the Ghost with Fleur, taking Piquet's rifle to be returned to his people with his fur and outfit. Confident that Antoine had had no part in the attempt to kill him and get his provisions, he wished Beaulieu to know Piquet's fate, as Antoine would now in all probability make for Whale River and could carry a message. Furthermore if anything had by chance happened to Beaulieu, Marcel wished to know it before starting north.

As Fleur drew him swiftly over the trail, ice-hard from much travelling, Jean decided that if Antoine wished to fight out the winter in the Salmon country, for the sake of their old friendship he would overlook the half-breed's weakness under Piquet's influence, and offer to take him.

Dawn was wavering in the gray east when Marcel reached the silent camp. He called loudly to wake the sleeping man inside; but there was no response.

Marcel's heavy eyebrows contracted in a puzzled look.

"Allo, Antoine!" Still no answer. Was he to find here more of the work of Joe Piquet? he wondered, as he swung back the slab-door of the shack and peered into the dim interior.

There in his bunk lay the half-breed.

"Wake up, Antoine!" Marcel cried, approaching the bunk; then the faint light from the open door fell on the gray face of Antoine Beaulieu, stiff in death.

"Tiens!" muttered Marcel. "Stabbed tru de heart w'en he sleep. Joe Piquet, he t'ink to get our feesh and beaver and fur, den he tell dem at Whale Riviere we starve out. Poor Antoine!"

Sick with the discovery, Jean sat beside the dead man, his head in his hands. Bitterly now, he regretted that he had refused the hand of his old friend in parting; that he had not taken him with him when he left the Ghost. It was clear that before starting to stalk Marcel's camp, Piquet had deemed it safer to seal the lips of Beaulieu forever as to the fate of the man he planned to kill.

"Poor Antoine!" Marcel sadly repeated. Outside, Fleur, fretting at the presence of death, whined to be off.

In the cold sunrise, Jean lashed the body of his boyhood friend, which he had sewed in some canvas, on the food cache, that it might rest in peace undefiled by the forest creatures, until on his return in May he might give it decent burial. Beside it he placed the fur-packs, rifles and outfits of the two men.

"Adieu, Antoine!" he called, waving his hand at the shrouded shape on the cache, and turned north.

CHAPTER XVI

THE STARVING MOON

March, the Crees' "Moon of the Crust on the Snow," was old. Camped on a chain of lakes in the Salmon country Marcel had been following the few traps for which he had bait and at the same time hunting widely for food. Soon, the sun, mounting higher and higher each day at noon, would begin to soften the surface of the snow which the freezing nights would harden into crust. Then he could travel far and fast. With much searching he had found another beaver lodge, postponing for a space the days when man and dog would have not even half rations to stay their hunger. The Frenchman's drawn face and loose capote evidenced the weeks of under-nourishment; but, though Fleur's great bones and the ropes of muscle, banding her back and shoulders, thrust through her shaggy coat with undue prominence, still she had as yet suffered little from the famine. So long as Jean Marcel had had fish or meat, his growing puppy had received the greater share, for she had already attained in that winter on the Ghost a height and bulk of bone equal to that of her slate-gray mother now far on the north coast.

For days Jean had been praying for the coming of the crust. With it he planned to make a wide circle back into the high barrens in search of returning caribou. Once the crust had set hard, travelling with the sled into new country would be easy. Food he must accumulate to take them through the April thaws, or perish miserably, with no one to carry the news of their fate to Whale River. Since the heart-breaking days when the white wolves drove the caribou south and the rabbits disappeared, he had, in moments of depression, sat by the fire at night, wondering, when June again came to Whale River and one by one the canoes of the Crees appeared, if, by chance, a pair of dark eyes would ever turn to the broad surface of the river for the missing craft of Jean Marcel—whether in the joy of her love for another the heart of the girl would sadden for one whose bones whitened in far Ungava hills.

At last the crust came. With eyes shielded by snow goggles made by cutting slits in flat pieces of spruce, for the glare of the sun on the barrens was intense, Jean started with his dog. All the food he had was on his sled. He had burned his bridges, for if he failed in his hunt, they would starve, but as well starve in the barrens, he thought, as back at camp.

They were passing through the thick spruce of a sheltered valley, travelling up-wind, when Fleur, sniffing hard, grew excited. There was something ahead, probably fur, so he did not tie his dog. Shortly Fleur started to bolt with the sled and Jean turned her loose. Following his yelping husky, who broke through the new crust at every leap, Marcel entered a patch of cedar scrub. There Fleur distanced him.

Shortly, a scream, followed by a din of snarls and squalls filled the forest. Close ahead a bitter struggle of creatures milling to the death was on. "Tiens!" exclaimed Jean, fearing for the eyes of his raw puppy, battling for the first time with the great cat of the north. He broke through the scrub to see the lynx spring backward from the rush of the dog and leap for the limbs of a low cedar. But the cat was too slow, for at the same instant, Fleur's jaws snapped on his loins, and with a wrench of her powerful neck, the husky threw the animal to the snow with a broken back. In a flash she changed her grip, the long fangs crunching through the neck of the helpless beast, and with a quiver, the lynx was dead.

Hot with the lust of battle, Fleur worried the body of her enemy. Reaching her, Jean proudly patted his dog's back.

"My Fleur! She make de *loup-cervier* run!" he cried, delighted with the courage and power of his puppy.

Then he anxiously examined the slashes of rapier claws on Fleur's muzzle and shoulders.

"Bon!" he said, relieved. "De lynx he very weak or he cut you deeper dan dese scratch."

As Jean hastily skinned the dead cat he marvelled at its emaciation.

"Ah! He also miss de rabbit. Lucky he starve or you get de beeg scratch, Fleur."

For answer the hot tongue of the dog sought his hands as she raised her brown eyes to his. With arms around her shaggy shoulders her proud master muttered into the ears of the delighted husky love words that would have been strange indeed to any but Fleur, who found them sweet beyond measure.

"My Fleur, she grow to be de dog, de most *sauvage!*" he cried. "Some day she keel de wolf, eh?"

Owing to the weakened condition of the lynx, Fleur's were but surface scratches. So furious had been the husky's assault on the starved cat that she had left no opening to the knife-like claws of the powerful hind legs.

Continuing east, four days later Marcel camped in a valley on the flank of a great barren. In the morning, tying Fleur with a rawhide thong which she could have chewed through with ease but had been taught to respect, he followed the scrub along the edge of the barren searching for caribou signs. Often he stopped to gaze out across the white waste reaching away east to the horizon, seeking for blue-gray objects whose movements in scraping away the snow to the moss beneath, would alone mark them as caribou. In places the great winds had swept the plateau almost bare, beating down the snow to a depth of less than a foot. All day he skirted the barren but at last turned back to his camp sick at heart and spent with the long day on the crust, following his meagre breakfast. Deep in the shelter of the thick timber of the valley, he had dug away the snow for his fire and sleeping place, lashing above his bed of spruce boughs a strip of canvas which acted both as windbreak and heat reflector. When they had eaten their slim supper, he freshened the fire with birch logs, and sat down with Fleur's head between his knees. The "Starving Moon" of the Montagnais hung over Jean Marcel.

"Fleur, you know we got onlee two day meat left? W'en dat go, Jean Marcel go too—een few day, a week maybe; and Fleur, w'at she do?"

The husky's slant eyes shone with her dog love into the set face of her master. She whined, wrinkling her gray nose, then her jaw dropped, which was her manner of laughing, while her hot breath steamed in the freezing air. Vainly she waited for the smile that had never failed to light Marcel's face in the old days at such advances.

Dropping his mittens Jean held the massive head between his naked hands.

"Jean Marcel feel ver' bad to leave Fleur alone. Wid no game she starve too, w'en he go," he said.

Fleur's deep throat rumbled in ecstasy as the hands of the master rubbed her ears.

"Back on de Ghost, Fleur, ees some feesh and meat Joe and Antoine left; not much, but eet tak' us to Whale Riviere, maybe."

The lips of Fleur lifted from her white teeth at the names of Jean's partners.

"You remember Joe Piquet, Fleur? Joe Piquet!"

The husky growled. She knew only too well the name, Joe Piquet.

"Eet ees four—five sleep to de Ghost, Fleur, shall we go? W'at you t'ink?"

The strained face in the fur-lined hood approached the dog's, whose eyes shifted uneasily from the fixed look of her master.

"We go back to de Ghost, Fleur, or mak' one beeg hunt for de deer?"

The perplexed husky, unable to meet Marcel's piercing eyes, sprang to her feet with a yelp.

"Bon!" he cried. "We mak' de beeg hunt!" He had had his answer and on the yelp of his dog had staked their fate. To-morrow he would push on into the barrens and find the caribou drifting north again, or flicker out with his dog as men for centuries had perished, beaten by the long snows.

In the morning he divided his remaining food into four parts; a breakfast and a supper for himself and Fleur, for two days. After that—strips of caribou hide and moss, boiled in snow water, to ease the throbbing ache of their stomachs.

Eating his thin stew, he shortened his belt still another hole over his lean waist, and harnessing Fleur, turned resolutely east into country no white man had ever seen, on his bold gamble for food or an endless sleep in the blue Ungava hills.

In his weakened state, black spots and pin-points of light danced before his eyes. Distant objects were often magnified out of all proportion. So intense was the glare of the high March sun on the crust that his wooden goggles alone saved him from snow-blindness. He travelled a few miles until dizziness forced him to rest. Later he continued on, to rest again, while the black nose of Fleur, who was still comparatively strong, sought his face, as she wondered at the reason for the master's strange actions.

By noon he had crossed no trail except that of a wolverine seeking food like himself, and finally went down into the timbered valley of a brook where he left Fleur and the sled. Then he started again on his hopeless search. As the streams flowed northeast, he was certain that he had crossed the Height of Land to the Ungava Bay watershed, and was now in the headwater country of the fabled River of Leaves, the Koksoak of the Esquimos, into which no hunter from Whale River had ever penetrated.

Marcel was snow-shoeing through the scrub at the edge of the plateau when far out on the barren he saw two spots. Shortly he was convinced that the objects moved.

"By Gar, deer! At last they travel nord!" he gasped, gazing with bounding pulses at the distant spots almost indistinguishable against the snow. Meat out there on the barren awaited him—food and life, if only he could get within range.

Cutting back into the scrub, that he might begin his stalk of the caribou from the nearest cover with the wind in his face, he moved behind a rise in the ground slowly out into the barren. With a caution he had never before exercised, lest the precious food now almost within reach should escape him, the starving man advanced.

At last he crawled up behind a low knoll, and stretched out on the snow. Cocking and thrusting his rifle before him, he wormed his way to the top of the rise and looked.

There a hundred yards off, playing on the crust, were two arctic foxes. Distorting their size, the barren ground mirage had cruelly deceived him.

With a groan the spent hunter dropped his head on his arms. "All dees for fox!" he murmured. Then, because foxes were meat, he took careful aim and shot one, wounding the other, which he killed with the second bullet. Hanging the carcasses in a spruce, Marcel continued to skirt the barren toward the east.

As dusk fell he returned to Fleur and made camp. Cutting up and boiling one of the foxes, he and the dog ate ravenously of the rank flesh, but hope was low in the breast of Jean Marcel. A day or two more of half rations and he was done. The spring migration of the caribou was not yet on. And when the deer did come, it would be too late. Jean Marcel would be past aid and Fleur—what would become of her? True, she could live on the flanks of the caribou herds like the wolves, but the wolves would find and destroy her.

Tortured by such thoughts, he sat by his fire, the husky's great head on his knee, her eyes searching his, mutely demanding the reason for his strange silence.

Another day of fruitless wandering in which he had pushed as far east as his fading strength would take him, and Jean shared the last of the food with his dog. He had fought hard to find the deer, had already travelled one hundred miles into the barrens, but he felt that it was no use; he was beaten. The spirit of the coureurs whose blood coursed his veins would drive him on and on, but without food the days of his hunting would be few. Henceforth it would be caribou hide boiled with moss from the barrens to ease the pinch of his hunger, but his strength would swiftly go. Then, when hope died, rather than leave his dog to the wolves, he would shoot Fleur and lying down beside her in his blanket, place the muzzle of his rifle against his own head.

Two days, in which Marcel and Fleur drank the liquor from stewed caribou hide and moss while he continued to hunt, followed. As he staggered into camp at the end of the second day the man was so weak that he scarcely found strength to gather wood for his fire. Fleur now showed signs of slow starvation in her protruding ribs and shoulders. Her heavy coat no longer shone with gloss but lay flat and lusterless. Vainly she whimpered for the food that her heart-sick master could not give her. With the dog beside him, Marcel lay by the fire numbed into indifference to his fate. The torment of hunger had vanished leaving only great weakness and a dazed brain. He thought of the three wooden crosses at Whale River; how restful it would be to lie beside them behind the Mission, instead of sleeping far in the barrens where the great winds beat ceaselessly by over the treeless snows. There Julie Breton might have planted forest flowers on the mound that marked the grave of Jean Marcel. But no, he had forgotten; Julie Breton would not be at Whale River. Julie would live at East Main and some day at her feet would play the children of Wallace. Julie would be married in the spring at Whale River, while the wolves and ravens were scattering the whitened bones of Jean Marcel over the valley, and there would be no rest—no rest.

What hopes he had had of a little house of their own at Whale River when he entered the service of the Company and drove the mail packet down the coast, with the team that Fleur would give him. How often he had pictured that home where Julie and the children would wait his return from summer voyage and winter trail; Julie Breton, whom he had loved from boyhood and whom, he had once prided himself, should love him, some day, when he had proved his manhood among the swart men of the East Coast.

All a dream—a dream. Julie was happy. She would soon marry the great man at East Main, while in a few days Jean Marcel was going to snuff out—smoulder a while, as a fire from lack of wood, dying by inches—by inches; and then two shots.

Poor Fleur! It had all come to pass because he had dared to follow and bring her home—had had no time to cache fish and game in the fall. She would have been better off with the half-breeds on the Rupert, where the caribou had gone. They would have kicked her, but fed her too. Yes, she would have been better there. Now he would take her with him, his own dog, when the time came. No more starvation for her, and a death in the barrens when she met the white wolves. Yes, he would take her with him.

So rambled the thoughts of Jean Marcel, as he lay with his dog facing the creeping death his rifle would cheat, until kindly sleep brought him surcease—sleep, followed by dreams of the wide barrens trampled by herds of the returning caribou, of juicy steaks sizzling over the fire, while Fleur gnawed contentedly at huge thigh bones.

CHAPTER XVII

THE TURN OF THE TIDE

BEFORE dawn, a cold nose nuzzling his face buried in his robe, waked Marcel.

"Fleur, hungry? Eet ees better to sleep w'en dere ees no breakfast," he protested.

The warm tongue sought the face of the drowsy man, and the dog, not to be put off, thrust her nose roughly into his robe, whimpering as she pulled at his capote.

"Poor Fleur!" he muttered. "No more meat for de pup! Lie down! Jean ees ver' tired."

But the dog, bent on arousing the master, grew only the more insistent. Seizing an arm in her jaws, she dragged Marcel from his rabbit-skin blankets.

As he sat upright, wide awake, Fleur sniffed long at the frosty air, then dashed yelping into the dusk up the trail toward the barren. Turning, she ran back to camp, whining excitedly.

"Tiens! W'at you smell, Fleur?" cried Marcel tearing his rifle with shaking hands from its skin case and cramming cartridges into a pocket. Could it be, he wondered, could it be the deer at last?

No, only a starving wolf or lynx, prowling near the camp, likely. But still he would go! The love of life was yet strong in Jean Marcel now that a gleam of hope warmed his heart.

Slipping his toes into the thongs of his snowshoes, he made Fleur fast to a tree, and started. He was so weak from lack of food that often he was forced to stop in the climb, shaken by his hammering heart. At last, exhausted, he dragged himself to the shoulder of the barren and on unsteady legs moved along the edge of the scrub, his eyes straining to pierce the wall of dusk which shut the plateau from his sight. But the shadows still blanketed the barren; so testing the light wind, that he might move directly out toward the game when the light grew stronger, he sat down to save his strength for the stalk. Only too clearly, his weakness warned him that it was his last hunt. By another day, even though he managed the climb, his trembling hands would prevent the lining of his sights on game.

As opal and rose faintly streaked the east, the teeth of the hunter, waiting to read the fate daylight would disclose, chattered in the stinging air. But a space now, and he would know whether he were to creep back to his blankets and wait for stark despair to steady the hand which would bring swift release for Fleur and himself, or whether meat, food, life, were scraping with round-toed hooves the snow from the caribou moss out there in the dim dawn.

Daylight filtered over the floor of snow to meet Marcel lying at the top of a rise out on the barren, waiting. As the light at length opened up the treeless miles, a sob shook the lean frame of the hunter. Tears welled in the deep-set eyes to course down and freeze upon his face, for there, on the snow before him, were the *blue-gray shapes of caribou.*

Three deer were feeding almost within range while farther out, gray patches, moving on the snow, marked other bands. At last the spring migration had reached him, and barely in time. He would see Whale River again when June came north. And Fleur, fretting back there in camp at his absence, after the lean days would revel and grow gigantic on deer meat.

Painfully Marcel crawled within easy range of the nearest caribou. As he attempted to line his sights in order to hit two with the first shot, as he had often done, the waving of his gun barrel in his trembling hands swept him cold with fear. The exertion of crawling to his position had cruelly shaken his nerves. So he rested.

Then he carefully took aim. As he fired, his heart skipped a beat, for he thought he had missed. But to his joy a caribou bounded from the snow, ran a few feet and fell, while another, stopping to scent the air before circling up-wind, gave him a second shot. The deer was badly hit and the next shot brought it down.

The tension of the crisis passed, the shattered nerves relaxed, and for a space the starving hunter lay limp in the snow. But warned by his rapidly numbing fingers, he forced himself to his feet and went to the deer. Out on the barren beyond the sound of his rifle scattered bands of caribou were feeding. Meat to take them through the big "break-up" of April was at hand. The lean face of Jean Marcel twisted into a grim smile.

He had beaten the long snows.

Stopping only to take the tongues and a piece of haunch, Marcel returned to his hungry dog. Frantic with the faint scent of caribou brought by the breeze off the barren, the famished Fleur chafed and fretted for his return.

"Here, Fleur, see what Jean Marcel got for you!"

The husky, maddened by the scent of the blood-red meat, plunged at her leash, her jaws dripping with slaver. Throwing her a chunk of frozen haunch which she bolted greedily, Marcel filled his kettle with snow and putting in a tongue and strips of steak to boil, lay down by his fire.

CHAPTER XVIII

SPRING AND FLEUR

AT intervals during the day Jean drank the strengthening broth, too "bush-wise" to sicken himself by gorging. By late afternoon he was able to drive the rejuvenated Fleur to the barren and bring back the meat on the sled. The days following were busy ones. At first his weakness forced him to husband his strength while the stew and roasted red meat were thickening his blood, but as the food began to tell, he was able to hunt farther and farther into the barrens where the main migration of the caribou was passing. When he was strong enough, he took Fleur with a load of meat back to his old winter camp, returning with traps. These he set at the carcasses he had shot, for foxes, lynxes and wolverines were drawn from the four winds to his kill. So while he hunted meat to carry him through April, and home, at the same time he added materially to his fur-pack.

Toward the end of March, before the first thaws softened his back trail and made sled-travel heartbreaking for Fleur, Jean began relaying west the meat he had shot. He had now, cached in the barrens, ample food to supply Fleur and himself until the opening of the waterways when fish would be a most welcome change. His sledding over, he returned to his camp in the barrens to get his traps and take one last hunt, for the lean weeks of the winter had made him over-cautious and he wished to make the trip back with a loaded sled.

By the coming of April, Fleur, in whom an abundance of red caribou meat had swiftly worked a metamorphosis, had increased in bone and weight. As Jean watched her throw her heavy shoulders into her collar and trot lightly off over the hard trail with a two hundred pound load his heart leaped with love of the beautiful beast who worshipped him with every red drop in her shaggy body. What a team she would give him some day! he thought. There would be nothing like them south of Hudson's Straits. And the Company would need them for the winter mail packet, with Jean Marcel to drive them.

Lately he had noticed a new trait in his dog. Several times, deep in the night when he waked to renew the fire, he had found that Fleur was not sleeping near him but had wandered off into the "bush." As she needed no food, he thought these night hunts of the husky peculiar. But at dawn, he always found Fleur back in camp sleeping beside him.

It was Marcel's last night in the barren-ground camp. Leaving Fleur, he had, as usual, hunted all day, returning with a sled load of meat which he drew himself. As he approached the camp he crossed the trail of a huge timber wolf and hurried to learn if his dog had been attacked, for tied as she was, she would fight with a cruel handicap. But Fleur greeted him as usual with yelps of delight. In the vicinity of the camp there were no tracks to show that the wolf had approached the husky. However, Marcel decided that he would not leave her again bound in camp unable to chew through the rawhide thongs in time to protect herself from sudden attacks of the wolves which roamed the country.

After supper man and dog sat by the fire, but Fleur was manifestly restless. Time and again she left his side to take long sniffs of the air. Not even the rubbing of her ears which usually brought grunts of pleasure had the magic to hold her long.

The early moon hung on the white brow of a distant ridge, and Jean, finishing his pipe, was about to renew his fire and roll into his blankets, when a long, wailing howl floated across the valley.

Fleur bounded to her feet, her quivering nostrils sucking in the keen air. Again the call of the timber wolf drifted out on the silent night. Fleur, alive with excitement, trotted into the "bush." In a moment she returned to the fire, whimpering. Then sitting down, she pointed her nose at the stars and her deep throat swelled with the long-drawn howl of the husky. Shortly, when the timber wolf replied, the lips of Fleur did not lift from her white fangs in a snarl nor did her thick mane rise as her ears pricked eagerly forward.

At dawn Jean waked with a sense of loneliness. Pushing together the embers of his fire, he put on fresh wood, and not seeing Fleur, called to her but she did not appear. She had a habit of prowling around the neighboring "bush" at dawn, inspecting fresh tracks of mice, searching for ptarmigan or for the snow-shoe rabbits that were not there. But when Marcel's breakfast was cooked Fleur was still absent. Thinking that a fresh game trail had led her some distance, he ate, then started to break camp. Finally he put his index and middle fingers between his teeth and blew the piercing whistle which had never failed to bring her leaping home. Intently, he listened for her answer somewhere in the valley of the stream or on the edge of the barren, but the yelp of his dog did not come to his straining ears.

Curious as to the cause of her absence Jean smoked his pipe and waited. He was anxious to start back with his traps and meat; but where was Fleur? Becoming alarmed by the middle of the morning, he made a wide circle of the camp hoping to pick up her trail. Two days previous there had been a flurry of snow sufficient to enable him to follow her tracks on the stiff crust. In the vicinity of the camp were traces of Fleur's recent footprints but finally, at a distance, Marcel ran into a fresh trail leading down into the brook-bottom. There he lost it, and after hours of search returned to camp to wait for her return. But the day wore away and the husky did not appear. Night came and visions of his dog lying somewhere stiff in the snow slashed and torn by wolves, tortured his thoughts. If only he could pick up her trail at daylight, he thought, for she might still live, crippled, unable to come to him, waiting for Jean Marcel who had never failed her.

As he sat brooding by his fire, he came to realize, now that he had lost her, what a part of him the dog had become. His thoughts drifted back over their life together, months of gruelling toil and—delight. Tears traced their way down the wind-burned cheeks of Marcel as he recalled her early puppy ways and antics, how she had loved to nibble with her sharp milk teeth at his moccasins and sit in the bow of the canoe, on their way down the coast, scolding at the seals and ducks; with what mad delight she had welcomed his visits to the stockade at Whale River circling him at full speed, until breathless and panting, she leaped upon him, her hot tongue seeking his hands and face. Then on the long trail home from the south coast marshes, how closely she would snuggle to his back as they lay on the beaches, as if fearing to lose him while she slept. And the winter on the Ghost, with its ghastly end—what a rock his dog had been when his partners failed him! In the moment of his peril, how savagely she had battled for Jean Marcel! Through the lean weeks of starvation when hope had died, to the dawn when she had waked him at the coming of the caribou, his thoughts led him. And now, when spring and Whale River were near, it was all over. Their life together with its promise of the future had been snapped short off. He should never again look into the slant, brown eyes of Fleur. He had lost his all; first Julie, and now, Fleur. There was nothing left.

At daybreak, without hope, he took up the search along the stream. Where the wind had driven, the crust now stiff with alternate freezing and thawing and swept clean of snow, would show little sign of the passing of the dog, but in the sheltered areas where the crust was softer and the young snow lay, he hoped to cross the tracks of Fleur. At length, miles from the camp, he picked up the trail of the dog in some light drift. Following the tracks across the brook-bottom and into the scrub of the opposite slope, he suddenly stopped, wide-eyed with amazement at the evidence written plainly in the light covering of the crust. Fleur's tracks had been joined by, and ran side by side with, the trail of a wolf.

"By Gar!" gasped the surprised Frenchman. "She do not fight wid de wolf!"

As he travelled, he found no marks of battle in the snow, simply the parallel trails of the two, dog and wolf, now trotting, now lengthening out into the long, wolf lope.

"Fleur leave Jean Marcel for de wolf!" the trapper rubbed his eyes as though suspicious of a trick of vision. His Fleur, whom he loved as his life and who adored Jean Marcel, to desert him this way in the night—and for a timber wolf.

It was strange indeed. Yet he had heard of such things. It was this way that the Esquimos kept up the marvellous strain to which Fleur belonged. He recalled the peculiar actions of the dog during the previous days—the wolf tracks near the camp; her excitement of the night before when the call had sounded over the valley. This wolf had been dogging their trail for a week and Fleur had known it.

"Ah!" he murmured, nodding his head. "Eet ees de spreeng!"

Yes, the spring was slowly creeping north and the creatures of the forest had already answered its call. It was April, and Fleur, too, had succumbed to an urge stronger for the moment than the love of the master. April, the Crees' "Moon of the Breaking of the Snow-Shoes," when, at last, the wind would begin to shift to the south and the nights lose their edge, only to shift back again, with frost. Then the snow would melt hard at noon, softening the trails, and later on, rain and sleet would drive in from the great Bay turning the white floor of the forest to slush, flooding the ice of the rivers which later would break up and move out, overrunning the shell of pond and lake which late in May would honeycomb and disappear.

Marcel followed the trails of wolf and dog until he lost them on the wind-packed snow of the barren. There was nothing to do but wait. He knew his dog had not forgotten him—would come home; but when? It was high time for his return to the camp in the Salmon country, to his precious cache of meat, which would attract lynxes and wolverines for miles around. The bears would soon leave their "washes" and the uprights of his cache were not proof against bear. But he would not go without Fleur, and she was away, somewhere in the hills.

Three days he waited, continuing to hunt that he might take a full sled-load back to his cache. But the weather was softening and any day now might mean the start of the big "break-up." It was deep in the third night that a great gray shape burst out of the forest and pounced upon the muffled figure under the shed-tent by the fire. As the dog pawed at the blanketed shape, Marcel, drugged with sleep and bewildered by the attack, was groping for his knife, when a familiar whine and the licks of a warm tongue proclaimed the return of Fleur, and the man threw his arms around his dog.

"Fleur come back to Jean?" Breaking from him, in sheer delight, the dog repeatedly circled the fire, then rearing on her hind legs put her fore-paws on his chest.

"Fleur bad dog to run away wid de wolf!" Marcel seized her by the jowls and shook the massive head, peering into the slant eyes in the dim starlight. And Fleur, as though ashamed of her desertion of the master, pushed her nose under his arm, the rumbling in her throat voicing her joy to be with him again. Then Marcel gave her meat from the cache which she bolted greedily.

It had not entered his mind once he had found her tracks that Fleur would not return to him, but during her long absence the condition of the snow had been a source of worry. Each day's delay meant the chance of the bottom suddenly falling out of the trail before he could freight his load of meat and traps back to his old camp far to the west.

Once the big thaw was on, all sledding would be over. So, hurriedly eating his breakfast, he started under the stars, for at noon he would be held up by the softening trail. Toward mid-afternoon, when it turned colder, he would again travel.

Back at his old camp, Marcel found that the fish-hook necklace with which he had circled each of the peeled spruce uprights of his cache had baffled the wolverines and lynxes lured for miles by the odor of meat. Resetting short trap-lines, he waited for the "break-up" with tranquil mind, for his cache groaned with meat.

CHAPTER XIX

WHEN THE ICE GOES SOFT

THE snows were fading fast before the rain and sleet of the big thaw. Often, at night, the softening winds shifted, to drive in raw from the north, again tightening the land with frost. But each day, as May neared, the sun swung higher and higher, slowly scattering the snow to flood the ice of myriad lakes and rivers. Already, Marcel had thrilled to the trumpets of the gray vanguards of the Canadas. On fair days the sun flashed from white fleets of "wavies," bound through seas of April skies to far Arctic ports.

With May the buds of birch and poplar began to swell, later to light with the soft green of their young leaves the sombre reaches of upland jack-pine and spruce. Rimming the rivers with red, the new shoots of the willows appeared. At dawn, now, from dripping spires, white-throats and hermit thrush, fleeter than the spring, startled the drowsing forest with a reveille of song.

One afternoon in May on his return from picking up a line of traps to be cached for use the following winter, Marcel went to the neighboring pond to lift his net. For safety on the rapidly sponging ice he wore his snow-shoes and carried a twelve-foot spruce pole. He had reset the net and was lashing an anchor line to a stake when suddenly the honeycombed shell crumbled beneath his feet.

As he sank, he lunged for the pole he had dropped to set the net, but the surface settled under his leap carrying him into the water. Fighting in the mush ice for the pole almost within reach, to his horror he found his right foot trapped. He could not move farther in that direction. The snow-shoe was caught in the net.

Marcel turned back floundering to the edge of firm ice, where he held himself afloat. Fast numbing with cold, as he clung, caught like a beaver in a trap, he knew that it was but a matter of minutes. Fleur, if only Fleur were there! But Fleur was hunting in the "bush."

With a great effort he braced himself on his elbows, got his frozen fingers between his teeth, and blew the signal, once heard, his dog had never failed to answer.

To the joy of the man slowly chilling to the bone, a yelp sounded in the forest. Rallying his ebbing strength, again Marcel whistled. Shortly Fleur appeared on the shore, sighted the master and bounded through the surface slop out to the fishing hole. Reaching Marcel, the husky seized a skin sleeve of his capote and arching her great back, fought the slippery footing in a mad effort to drag him from the water. But the net held him fast.

"De stick, Fleur! De stick dere!" Marcel pointed toward the pole.

Sensing his gesture, the dog brought the pole to the ice edge. Then with the pole bridging the hole, its ends on firm ice, Marcel worked his way to the submerged net, but the sinkers had hopelessly tangled the meshes with his snow-shoe. Under his soggy capote was his knife. His stiff fingers fumbled desperately with the knot of his sash but failed to loose it. Again Fleur seized his sleeve and pulled until she rolled backward with a patch of the tough hide in her teeth.

The situation of the trapped man seemed hopeless. The chill of the water was fast numbing his senses. Already his heart slowed with the torpor of slow freezing. With difficulty now he kept the excited Fleur from plunging beside him into the mush ice.

Then with a final effort he got his free leg with its snow-shoe, over the pole, and seizing the husky's tail with both hands, cried:

"Marche, Fleur! Marche!"

Settling low between wide-spread fore-legs, the dog dug her nails into the soft ice and hurled her weight into a fierce lunge. As her feet slipped, the legs of the husky worked like piston rods showering Marcel's face with water, her nails gouging the ice, while she fought the drag of the net.

At last, something gave way, Marcel felt himself move. Slowly the great dog drew her master over the pole and upon the ice with the net still anchored to his right foot.

Still gripping Fleur's tail in his left hand, with the other he finally reached his knife and groping in the icy water slashed the heel thong of the caught shoe. Free, Marcel limped to his camp, Fleur, now leaping beside him, now marching proudly with his sleeve in her teeth.

The heat of the fire and the hot broth soon started the blood of the half-frozen Frenchman, who lay muffled in a blanket. Near him sprawled the husky, who had sensed only too acutely on the ice the danger menacing her master and would not now leave his sight, but with head on paws watched the blanketed figure through eyes which spoke the thoughts she could not express: "Jean may need Fleur again. She will stay with him by the fire."

Once too often, Marcel mused, he had gambled with the rotten spring ice, and now had barely missed paying for his rashness. To drown in a hole like a muskrat, after pulling out of the starvation days with a cache heavy with meat and fish, was unthinkable. But, after all, what did it matter? Life would be of small value now with Julie out of it.

CHAPTER XX

THE DEAD MAN TELLS HIS TALE

When, late in May, the snow had left the open places reached by the sun and the ice cleared the rivers, Marcel was ready to make his first trip to the camp on the Ghost. Poor Antoine would have to lie content in a shallow grave among the boulders of the river shore, for the frost was still in the ground. Before the weather softened Jean had smoked the remainder of his meat and now he faced a ten-mile portage with his outfit. Before the trails went bad he could have freighted on the sled sufficient food for his journey home but had preferred to face the "break-up" in his own camp near a fish-lake and relay his meat over on his back in May. The memories of the winter aroused by the camp on the Ghost were too grim to attract him to the comfortable shack.

One morning at sunrise, after lashing a pack on Fleur's broad back, he threw his tump-line over a bag of smoked meat and swinging it to his shoulders, started over the trail. In the middle of the forenoon he walked into the clearing on the Ghost and pushing off the head strap of his line, dropped his load.

Glancing at the cache where he had left the body of Antoine Beaulieu lashed in canvas with the fur-packs and rifles of the dead men, Marcel muttered in surprise:

"By Gar! Dat ees strange t'ing!"

The scaffold was empty; the body of Antoine had been removed and not a vestige remained of the fur-packs and outfits of Jean's partners. Neither wolverines, lynxes nor bears, had they been able to overcome the fish-hook barriers guarding the uprights, would have stripped the platform in such fashion. Searching the soft earth, he found the faint tracks of moccasins which the recent rain had not obliterated. But down on the river shore the mud told the story. A canoe had landed there within a week, for in spite of the rain the deep impress of the feet of men carrying heavy loads still marked the beach. Since the ice went out someone who knew that the three men were wintering there, had travelled up the Ghost from the Whale, but why? They could not have been starving, for fish could then be had on the Whale for the setting of a net. Evidently they had buried Antoine and taken the fur-packs, rifles, and outfits of the two men to Whale River. Marcel searched for a message, in the phonetic writing employed throughout the north, burned into a blazed tree, or on a scrap of birch-bark, left in the shack, but found nothing.

The cabin was as he had last seen it. They had thought him, also, dead somewhere in the "bush" and had left no word, or —— Then the situation opened to him from the angle of view of the Cree visitors.

A camp on the verge of starvation, witnessed by the depleted cache; a dead man stabbed to the heart, with his rifle and outfit beside him; also, the rifle and personal belongings, easily identified by his relatives, of a second man, who, if he were still alive, would have had them in his possession. Of the third man, who was to winter with them, no trace at the camp. Two dead and the third, possibly alive, if he had not starved out. And that third man was Jean Marcel.

That was the grim tale which was travelling down the river ahead of him to the spring trade. Who killed Antoine Beaulieu, and where is Piquet? This was the question he would have to answer. This the factor and the kinsmen of his partners would demand of the third man, if he survived to reach the post. Yes, Whale River would anxiously await the return of Jean Marcel that spring, but would Whale River believe his story? Of the people of the post he had no doubt. Julie, Père Breton, the factor, Angus, Jules, he could count on. They knew him—were his friends. But the Crees, and half-breds; would they believe that Joe

Piquet had been the evil genius of the tragedy on the Ghost, Joe Piquet, now dead and helpless to speak in his own defense? Would they believe in the innocence of the man who alone of the three partners had fought free of the long famine? Marcel's knowledge of the Indians' mental make-up told him that since the visit of the Crees to the camp his case was hopeless.

They would readily believe that he had killed his partners for the remaining food, and, not anticipating the coming of a canoe in the spring to the camp, had gone after caribou, planning to secrete the body of Antoine, with its evidence of violence, on his return.

Of those who had peopled the canoes starting for the up-river summer camps in July, many a face would now be absent when the Crees returned for this year's trade. Famine surely had come to more than one camp of the red hunters that winter; and doubtless, swift death in the night, also, among some of those, who, when caught by the rabbit plague and the absence of wintering caribou, like Piquet, went mad with hunger. Disease, too, as a hawk strikes a ptarmigan, would have struck down many a helpless child and woman marooned in snow-drifted tepee in the silent places. Old age would have claimed its toll in the bitter January winds.

To the red hunters, starvation and tragic death wore familiar faces. In the wide north they were common enough. So, when in the spring, men loosed from the maw of the pitiless snows returned without comrade, wife or child, seeking succor at the fur-posts, with tales of death by starvation or disease, the absence of witnesses or evidence compelled the acceptance of their stories however suspicious the circumstances. There being no proof of guilt, and because, moreover, their tales were often true, there could be no punishment, except the covert condemnation of their fellows or the secret vengeance of kinsman or friend in the guise of a shot from the "bush" or knife thrust in the dark. He recalled the cases he knew or which he had heard discussed over many a camp-fire, of men on the East Coast, sole survivors of starvation camps, who would go to their graves privately branded as murderers by their fellows.

Grim tales of his father returned to him; of the half-breed from Nichicun who, it was commonly believed, had eaten his partner; of Crees who had appeared in the spring at the posts without parents, or wives and children, to tell conflicting stories of death through disease or starvation; of the Frenchman at Mistassini—still a valued servant of the Company—who was known from Fort Albany to Whale River and from Rupert to the

Peribonka, as the squaw-man who saved himself on the Fading Waters by deserting his Montagnais girl wife. These and many more, through lack of any proof of guilt, had escaped the long arm of the government which, through the fur-posts, reached to the uttermost valleys of the north.

And so it must have been with Jean Marcel, however suspicious his story, had he buried Antoine somewhere in the snow, as he had Piquet, instead of lashing the body on the cache with its telltale death wound. As it was he already saw himself, though innocent, condemned in the court of Cree opinion as the slayer of his friend.

As he came to a realization of how his case would look, even to the whites at Whale River, he cursed the dead man Piquet for bringing all this upon a guiltless man—for leaving him this black legacy of suspicion.

Well, he swore to himself, they should believe his story at the post, for it was the truth; and if any man, white or red, openly doubted his innocence, he would have to answer to Jean Marcel. To be branded on the East Coast as the assassin of his partners was a bitter draught for the palate of the proud Frenchman. For generations the Marcels had borne an honored name in the Company's service and now for the last of them to be suspected of foul murder, was disgrace unthinkable.

So ran his thoughts as he hurried back over the trail to his camp. Of one thing he felt sure. The situation brought about by the visit of the Crees demanded his presence at the post as soon after their arrival as his paddle could drive his canoe. From the appearance of the tracks on the beach they already had a good start and it would take two days for him to pack to the Ghost what meat and outfit he needed for the trip, besides his furs. The rest he could cache.

CHAPTER XXI

THE BLIND CLUTCH OF CIRCUMSTANCE

THREE days later, he had run the strong-water of the Ghost to Conjuror's Falls, where he exchanged Beaulieu's canoe for his own, cached the previous fall, and continued on to the Whale until the moon set, when he camped.

Then next morning, long before the rising sun, reaching the smoking surface in his path, rolled the river mists back to fade on the ridges, Marcel, with Fleur in the bow, was well started on his three-hundred-mile journey. Travel as he might, he could not hope to overtake the canoe bearing the tale of the tragedy to Whale River; but each day when once the news had reached the post, the story, passed from mouth to mouth among the Crees, would gather size and distortion with Marcel not present to refute it. There was great need for speed, so he drove his canoe to the limit of his strength, running all rapids which skill and daring could outwit.

Different, far, from the home-coming he had pictured through the last weeks, would be his return to Whale River. True, there would have been no long

June days with Julie Breton, as in previous summers, no walks up the river shore when the low sun turned the Bay to burnished copper, and later, the twilight held deep into the night. If she were not already married her days would be too full to spare much time to her old friend Jean Marcel. But there would have been rest and ease, after the months of toil and famine—long talks with Jules and Angus, with worry behind him in the hills. Instead he was returning to his friends branded as a criminal by the evidence of the cache on the Ghost.

At times, when the magic of the young spring, in the air, the forest, the hills, for a space swept clean his troubled brain of dark memory, he dreamed that the water-thrushes in the river willows called to him: "Sweet, sweet, sweet, Julie Breton!" That yellow warblers and friendly chickadees, from the spruces of the shore, hailed him as one of the elect, for was he not also a lover? That the kingfishers which scurried ahead of his boat gossiped to him of hidden nests. Deeply, as he paddled, he inhaled the scent of the flowering forest world, the fragrance of the northern spring, while his birch-bark rode the choked current. And then, the stark realization that he had lost her, and the shadow of his new trouble, would bring him rough awakening.

Meeting no canoes of Cree hunters bound for the trade, for it was yet early, in nine days Marcel turned into the post. He smiled bitterly as he saw in the clearing a handful of tepees. Around the evening fires they had doubtless already convicted Jean Marcel, alive or dead. Familiar with the half-breed weakness for exaggeration, he wondered in what form the story of the cache on the Ghost had been retailed at the trade-house. Well, he should soon know.

The howling of the post dogs announced his arrival, stirring Fleur after her long absence from the sight of her kind to a strenuous reply. Leaving his canoe on the beach Marcel went at once to the Mission, where the door was opened by the priest.

"Jean Marcel!" The bearded face of the Oblat lighted with pleasure as he opened his arms to the wanderer. "You are back, well and strong? The terrible famine did not reach you?" he asked in French.

Jean's deep-set eyes searched the priest's face for evidence of a change toward him but found the same frank, kindly look he had always known.

"Yes, Father, I beat the famine but I have bad news. Antoine is dead. He was ——"

"Yes, I know," Père Breton hastily broke in. "They brought the word. It is terrible! And Piquet, is he dead also?"

"Yes, Father," Marcel said quietly. "Joe Piquet was killed by Fleur, here, after he stabbed Antoine!"

"*Juste Ciel!* Killed by Fleur after he stabbed Antoine?" repeated the priest, staring at the husky.

"Yes, I wish to tell you all first, Father, before I go to the trade-house—and Julie?" Jean inquired, his voice vibrant with fear of what the answer might be.

"Put the dog in the stockade and I will call Julie."

Ah, then she was not married. Marcel breathed with relief.

"We have been very sad here, wondering whether you had starved—were alive," continued the priest. "The tale Piquet's uncle, Gaspard Lelac, and sons brought in day before yesterday made us think you also might have ——"

"Did they say Antoine had been stabbed?" interrupted Marcel, for the priest had avoided mention of the cause of Beaulieu's death.

"They said they found his body." Père Henri still shunned the issue.

"Where?" demanded Marcel.

"Buried on the river shore!"

"They lie!" As Marcel had anticipated, the half-breeds had embellished the sufficiently damning evidence of the cache. He realized that he faced a battle with men who would not scruple to lie when the stark facts already looked badly enough.

"They never were truthful people, my son. We have hoped and prayed for your coming to clear up the mystery."

Jean put Fleur in the stockade and returned to the house. Julie Breton stood in the doorway.

"Welcome home, Jean!" she cried in French, giving him both hands. "Why—you are not thin!" She looked wonderingly at his face. "We thought—you also—had starved." Her eyes filled with tears as she gazed at the man already numbered with the dead.

Swept by conflicting emotions, Marcel swallowed hard. Were these sisterly tears of joy at his safe return or did she weep for the Jean Marcel she once knew, now dishonored?

"There, there! *Ma petite!*" consoled Père Henri, stroking the dark head. "We have Jean here again, safe; all will be well in time."

"Julie had you starved out in the 'bush,' Jean, when we heard their story," explained the priest.

But the puzzled youth wondered why Père Henri did not mention the charges that the half-breeds must have made on reaching Whale River.

Recovering her self-control Julie excused herself to prepare supper. Then before asking what the Lelacs had told the factor, Marcel related to the priest the grim details of the winter on the Ghost; of the deaths of Antoine and Piquet, of his fortunate meeting with the returning caribou, and of his discovery, on his return to the old camp, of the visit of the Lelacs' canoe.

"Father, it looks bad for me. They found Antoine stabbed and Piquet's fur and outfit. I brought his rifle back to the camp and cached it with his stuff and Antoine's to bring it all down river in the spring to their people."

At this the heavy brows of the priest lifted in surprise. Marcel continued:

"The cache was empty. It was a starvation camp. Antoine was dead, and Piquet also, for his outfit was there. Seeing these things, what could anyone think? That the third man, Jean Marcel, did this and then went into the barrens for caribou. There he starved out, or else found meat and would return, when he could clear himself if able. Father, it was my wish to tell you my story before I heard the tale the Lelacs brought to the post. Then you could judge between us."

The priest leaned forward in his chair and rested his hands on Marcel's shoulders. His eyes sought those of the younger man which met his gaze unwaveringly. "Jean Marcel," he said, "I have known you since your father brought you to Whale River as a child. You have never lied to me. True, the circumstances are unfortunate; but you have told me the truth. We did not believe that you had killed your comrades; you would have starved first; nor did Gillies or McCain or Jules believe in the truth of the charge of the Lelacs. They are waiting to hear your story. Also, since hearing your side, I see why the Lelacs are anxious to have it believed at the trade-house that you were responsible for the deaths of these men. They are grinding an axe of their own. It is not alone because they are kin of Piquet that they wish to discredit and injure you."

"How do you mean, Father?" Marcel asked, curious as to the significance of the priest's last statement.

"I will tell you later, my son. You should report at the trade-house now. They are waiting for you."

Cheered with the knowledge that his old friends were still staunch, that the factor had waited for his return before expressing even an opinion, Marcel hurried to the trade-house.

Meeting no one as he passed the scattered tepees, he flung open the slab-door of the log-building and with head high, entered.

"Jean Marcel! By Gar, we hear you arrive!" roared the big Jules, rushing upon the youth with open arms. "You not starve out, eh?"

Then Gillies and McCain, wringing his hand, added their welcome. Surely, he thought, with choked emotion, these men had not turned against him because of the tales of Lelac.

"Jean, you had a hard winter with the rabbits gone," suggested Gillies. "You must have found the caribou this spring?"

"Yes, I find de caribou, M'sieu, but I travel far for dem; eet was hard time een Mars."

"And the dog, you didn't have to eat your dog, Jean?" asked McCain.

Marcel's face hardened.

"De dog and Jean, dey feast and dey starve togeder. I am no Cree dog-eater. Dat dog she save my life, one, two tam, dees winter, M'sieu."

Never had the thought of sacrificing Fleur as a last resort entered the mind of Marcel in the lean days on the barrens.

"Well, my lad," said Gillies heartily, "we are sure glad to have you back alive. We hear there was much starvation on the East Coast this year, with the rabbit plague and the scarcity of deer."

They also, Marcel saw, were waiting to hear his story before alluding to the charges of the half-breed kinsmen of Piquet.

"M'sieu Gillies," Jean began. "I weesh to tell you what happen on de Ghost. De Lelacs bring a tale to Whale Riviere dat ees not true."

"We have paid no attention to them, Jean, trusting you would show up and could explain it all then. I know you and I know the Lelacs. I was sorry to hear about Antoine and Piquet but I don't think you had any part in it, lad. Be sure of that!"

"T'anks, M'sieu." Then slowly and in great detail Marcel related to the three men, sitting with set faces, the gruesome history of the past winter. When he came to the night that Fleur had destroyed the crazed Piquet, the Hudson's Bay men turned to each other with exclamations of wonder and admiration.

"That's a dog for you! She got his wind just in time!" muttered Gillies.

"Tiens! Dat Fleur she is lak de wolf," added Jules.

"You ask eef I eat her, M'sieu," Marcel turned on McCain grimly. "Could you eat de dog dat save your life?"

"No, by God! I'd starve first!" thundered the Scotchman.

"I love dat dog," said Jean quietly, and went on with his tale.

Breathless, they heard how he had pushed deeper and deeper beyond the hunting grounds of the Crees into the nameless barrens until he reached streams flowing northeast into Ungava Bay, and at last met the returning caribou; how the great strength of Fleur beat the drag of the net, when he was slowly freezing in the lake; and then he came to his return to the Ghost.

In detail Marcel enumerated the articles belonging to Antoine and Piquet which he had placed on the stage of the cache beside Beaulieu's body when he left for the Salmon country and which had been taken by the Lelacs to Whale River.

"I lashed Antoine een hees shed-tent and put heem on de cache, for the wolverine and lynx would get heem een de snow." As Marcel talked McCain and Gillies exchanged significant looks.

"Um!" muttered the factor, when Jean had finished. "Something queer here!"

"What, M'sieu?" Marcel demanded.

"Why, Lelac says he found the body of Antoine buried under stones on the shore and that there was nothing on the cache except the empty grub bags."

"Dey say de fur and rifle was not dere?"

"Yes, nothing on the cache!"

"Den I must have de rifle and de fur; ees dat eet?"

"Yes, that's what they insinuate."

"Ah-hah!" Marcel scowled, thinking hard. "Dey say dey fin' noding, so do not turn over to you de rifle and fur-pack."

"Yes, they claim you must have hidden them as you hid the body."

"Den how do dey know Piquet ees dead too?" Marcel's dark features relaxed in a dry smile. It was not, then, solely the desire for vengeance on the murderer of their kin that had prompted the half-breeds to distort the facts.

"They say his extra clothes and his outfit were in the cabin, only his rifle and fur missing. Now, Jean," he continued, "I am perfectly satisfied with your story. I believe every word of it. I knew your father and I know you. The Marcels are not liars. But the Lelacs are going to make trouble over the evidence they found at your camp. Suspicion always points to the survivor in a starvation camp, and you know the circumstances are against you, my lad."

"M'sieu," Marcel protested. "Eef I keel Antoine, I would tak' heem into de bush and hide heem, I would not worry ovair de fox and wolverine."

"Of course you would have hidden the body somewhere. We appreciate that. But as they are trying to put this thing on you they ignore that side of it. What you admit they found,—Antoine's body with a stab wound, and Piquet's outfit, makes it look bad to people who don't know you as we do. They won't believe that the famine got Piquet in the head. They'll say that's a tale you made up to get yourself off."

Marcel went hot with anger. His impulse was to seek the Lelacs and have it out, then and there. But he possessed the cool judgment of a long line of ancestors whose lives had often depended on their heads, so he choked back his rage.

"Now I don't want it carried down the coast that you killed your partners, Jean," went on Gillies. "Young as you are, you'll never live it down. And besides, there's no knowing what the government might do. I'll have to make a report, you know. So we've got to do some tall thinking between us before the hunters get in."

While the factor talked, the swift brain of Marcel had struck upon a plan to trap and discredit the Lelacs, but he wished to think it over, alone, before proposing it at the trade-house, so held his tongue. When he was ready he would ask the factor to hold a hearing. Then he could put some questions to his accusers that would make them squirm. One question he did ask before packing his fur and outfit from the beach up to the Mission.

"Have de Lelac traded dere fur, M'sieu?"

"No, we haven't started the trade yet."

"W'en dey trade dere fur weel you hold it from de oder fur, separate?"

"Why, yes, I'll do that for you, but you can't hope to identify skins, Jean."

A corner of Marcel's mouth curled in a quizzical smile. "Wait, M'sieu Gillies; I tell you later," and with a "Bon-soir!" he went out.

CHAPTER XXII

IN THE DEPTHS

ALTHOUGH it would have been pure suicide for anyone to attempt to take Fleur from the stockade against her will, Marcel feared that some dark night those who wished his disgrace might loose their venom in an injury to his dog. So, refusing a room in the Mission House, he pitched his tent on the grass inside the spruce pickets where Fleur might lie beside him.

Here his staunch friend Jules sought Jean out. It seemed that Inspector Wallace had been up the coast at Christmas, had stayed a week, and although no one knew exactly what had transpired, whether he had as yet become a Catholic, there was no doubt in the minds of the curious that the Scotchman would shortly remove the sole obstacle to his marriage to Julie Breton.

With head in hands, Jean Marcel listened to the news, none the less bitter because anticipated. The loyal Jules' crude attempt to console the broken-hearted hunter went unheard. Fate had made him its cat's-paw. Not only had he lost his heart's desire, but his name was now a byword at Whale River; the woman he held dear and his honor, both gone. There was nothing left to lose. He was indeed bankrupt.

During supper, Jean was plied with questions by Julie, who, in his absence, had had his story from her brother. To the half-breeds she never once alluded, seemingly interested solely in the long hunt for caribou on the barrens and in Fleur's rescue of her master from the lake.

For the delicacy of the girl in avoiding the tragedy which was plainly claiming his thoughts, he was deeply grateful. Clearly from the first, she had believed in the honor of Jean Marcel. But with what was evidently a forced gaiety, the girl sought, on the night of his return, to banish from his mind thoughts of the cloud blackening the future—of the trying days ahead.

"Come, Jean Marcel," she laughed, speaking to him, as always, in French, "are you not glad to see us that you wear a face so dismal? You have not told me how you like this muslin gown." She pirouetted on her shapely moccasined feet challenging his approval. "Henri says I'm growing thin. Is it not becoming? No? Then I shall eat and grow as fat as big Marie, the Montagnais cook at the Gillies'."

The sober face of Jean Marcel lighted at her pleasantry. His brooding eyes softened as they followed the trim figure in the simple muslin gown.

It was a rare picture indeed for a man who had but just finished seven months in the "bush," half the time with the spectre of starvation haunting his heels—this girl with the dusky eyes and hair, the vivid memory of whose face he had carried with him into the nameless barrens. But she belonged to another and he, Jean Marcel, was branded as a murderer at Whale River, even if he escaped the law.

Presently, when Père Breton was called from the room to minister to a Cree convert, Julie became serious.

"Jean Marcel, I have much to say to you; but it is hard—to begin."

"I should think you would have little to say to Jean Marcel."

"Why, because some half-breeds have brought a story to Whale River which was not true?"

"Well, enough of it is true, Julie, to make the Indians believe, when they hear it, that Jean Marcel killed his partners to save himself from starvation."

"Not if Père Breton and Monsieur Gillies have any influence with the Crees. They will not allow them to believe such a cruel falsehood," protested Julie, vehemently.

Marcel smiled indulgently at the girl's ignorance of Cree psychology.

"The harm is already done," he said. "One man is found stabbed; also the outfit of another gone. The third man comes back. No matter what M'sieu Gillies and Père Henri tell them they will believe the man guilty who got out alive."

"They will not believe these Lelacs, when they are shown to be liars," she insisted, stamping her foot impatiently.

"They have lied about the rifle and fur only, Julie. They are telling the truth when they say they found Antoine and some of Piquet's outfit. The rest does not matter except to make me a thief as well as murderer."

"Oh, but it is all so unjust, so terrible to be accused like this when because of your good heart you wished to bury Antoine decently in the spring instead of leaving him in the snow where they would never have found him. It is too ——" Julie Breton's voice broke with emotion. Through tears her dark eyes flashed in protest at the pass to which a blind fate had brought an innocent man.

Marcel was deeply touched by this revelation of the girl's loyalty; but her tears roused his heart to a wild beating. Unable to speak, he faced her, his dark features illumined with the gratitude and love he could not voice. For a space he sat fighting for the mastery of his emotions. Then he said huskily:

“Julie Breton, you give me great happiness—when you say you believe me—are still my friend.”

“Oh, la, la! Nonsense!” she cried, dabbing with a handkerchief at her wet eyes as she recovered her poise, “you are a boy, so foolish, Jean. Do you think that we, your friends who know you, will permit this thing? It is impossible!” And changed the subject, nor did she allow him to return to it.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN THE EYES OF THE CREES

Day by day the ebb-tide brought in the canoes of returning Crees. Gradually tepees filled the post clearing. And with the coming of the hunters from the three winds, was heard many a tale of famine in far valleys; of families blotted out; of little victims of starvation and disease; of the aged too frail to endure through the lean moons of the rabbit-plague until the return of the caribou, which had spelt life to those who waited.

Tragedy there had been, as in every winter of famine; but however sinister were the secrets which, that spring, many a mute valley held locked in its green forests, no rumors of such, except the tale of the murders on the Ghost, had reached Whale River. Pitiless desertion of the aged and the helpless, death by violence, doubtless, the starving moon had shone upon; but none had lived to tell the tale, none had seen the evidence, except those who had profited with their lives, and their lips were forever sealed. And so, as Marcel had foreseen, to the gathering families of Crees who themselves had but lately escaped the maw of the winter, the tale of the Lelacs, expanding as it travelled, found ready acceptance.

As yet, Jean, chafing under the odium of his position at the post, had not faced his accusers. But the plan of his defense which had been decided on after a conference with Gillies and Père Breton, depended for its success on the trading of their fur by the Lelacs, and the uncle and cousins of Joe Piquet for some reason had traded no fur. So the proud Frenchman went his way among the hunters at Whale River with a high head and silent tongue.

Many of those who, the spring previous, had lauded his daring in entering the land of the Windigo and voyaging to the coast by the Big Salmon, now, at his appearance exchanged significant glances, avoiding the steady eyes of the man they had condemned without a hearing. Shawled women and girls, who formerly, at the trade, had cast approving glances at the wide-shouldered youth with the clean-cut features, now whispered pointedly as he passed and children often shrank from him in terror as from one defiled. But Marcel had been prepared for the effect of the tale of the Lelacs upon the mercurial red men, in the memories of many of whom still lurked the ghosts of deeds of their own whose ghastly details the ears of no man would ever hear.

Since his return he had not once met the Lelacs face to face. Always they had hastily avoided him when he appeared on the way to his canoe or the trade-house. Jean had been strictly ordered by Gillies under no circumstances to seek trouble with his accusers or their friends, so he ignored them. And their disinclination to encounter the son of the famous André Marcel had not gone unmarked by the keen eyes of more than one old hunter. Many a red man and half-breed, friends of the father, who respected the son, had frankly expressed to him their disbelief in the charges of the Lelacs, accepting his story which Gillies had published to the Crees, that Beaulieu had been stabbed by Joe Piquet while Marcel was absent and Piquet killed later by the dog. Strongly they had urged him to make the Lelacs eat their lies, promising their support; but Jean had explained that it was necessary to wait; later his day would come.

Occasionally when Marcel crossed the post clearing, pulsing with the varied life of the spring trade, to descend the cliff trail to his canoe, there marched by his side one whose name, also, was anathema with many of the Crees. That comrade was Fleur. The story of Piquet's death as told by Jean at the trade-house, though scouted by the Lelacs, had, nevertheless, left a deep impression; and the great dog, now called the "man-killer," who towered above the scrub huskies of the Indians as a mastiff over a poodle, was given a wide berth. But to avoid trouble with the Cree dogs, Jean kept Fleur for the most part in the Mission stockade. There Gillies and McCain and Jules had come to admire the bulk and bone of the husky they had last seen as a lumbering puppy, now in size and beauty far surpassing the Ungavas bought by the Company of the Esquimos. There, Crees, still friendly to Jean, lingered to gossip of the winter's hardships and stare in admiration at his dog. There, too, Julie romped with Fleur, grown somewhat dignified with the gravity of her approaching responsibilities. For, to the delight of Jean, Fleur was soon to present him with the dog-team of his dreams.

Then when the umiaks of the Esquimos began to arrive from the coast, packed with tousle-headed children and the priceless sled-dogs, taking Fleur, Jean sought out his old friend Kovik of the Big Salmon. As he approached the skin lodge on the beach, beside which the kin of Fleur were made fast to prevent promiscuous fighting with strange dogs, she answered their surly greeting with so stiff a mane, so fierce a show of fangs, that Jean pulled her away by her rawhide leash, lest her reputation suffer further by adding fratricide to her crimes.

Playmates of her puppyhood, mother who suckled her, she had forgotten utterly; vanished was all memory of her kin. She held but one allegiance, one love; the love approaching idolatry she bore the young master who had taken her in that far country from the strange men who beat her with clubs; who had brought her north again through wintry seas; who had companioned her through the long snows and in the dread days of the famine had shared with her his last meat. The center and sum of her existence was Jean Marcel. All other living things were as nothing.

"Kekway!" cried the squat pair of Huskies, delighted at the appearance of the man who had given them back their first born. "Kekway!" chuckled a half-dozen round-faced children, shaking Jean's hand in turn.

"Huh!" grunted the father, his eyes wide with wonder at the sight of Fleur, ears flat, muttering dire threats at her yelping brethren straining at their stakes, "dat good dog!"

"Oui, she good dog," agreed Jean. "Soon I have dog-team lak Husky!"

Shifting a critical eye from Fleur to his own dogs the Esquimo nodded.

"Ha! Ha! You ketch boy in water, you get bes' dog."

The Esquimo had not erred in his judgment of puppies. He had indeed given the man who had cheated the Big Salmon of his son the best of the litter. At sixteen months, Fleur stood inches higher at the shoulder and weighed twenty pounds more than her brothers. Truly, with the speed and stamina of their sire, the timber wolf, coupled with Fleur's courage and power, these puppies, whose advent he awaited, should make a dog-team unrivalled on the East Coast.

"Cree up dere," continued the Esquimo, pointing toward the post clearing, "say de dog keel man."

Marcel nodded gravely. "Oui, man try kill me, she kill heem."

"Huh! De ol' dog keel bad Husky, on Kogaluk one tam."

Fleur indeed had come from a fighting strain—dogs that would battle to the death or toil in the traces until they crumpled on the snow, for those they loved or to whom they owed allegiance.

CHAPTER XXIV

ON THE CLIFFS

MARCEL was walking on the high river shore above the post with Julie Breton and Fleur. Like a floor below them the surface of the Great Whale moved without ripple in the still June afternoon. Out over the Bay the sun hung in a veil of haze. Back at the post, even the huskies were quiet, lured into sleep by the softness of the air. It was such a day as Jean Marcel had dreamed of more than a year before, in January, back in the barrens, when powdery snow crystals danced in the air as the lifting sun-dogs turned white wastes of rolling tundra into a shimmering sea. He was again with Julie on the cliffs, but there was no joy in his heart.

"The Lelacs have traded their fur," he said, breaking a long silence; "the hearing will take place soon, now."

"Yes, I know, you were with Monsieur Gillies and Henri very late last night," she replied, watching the antics of an inquisitive Canada jay in an adjacent birch.

"Yes, we had some work to do. The Lelacs will not like what we have to tell them."

"I knew that you would be able to show the Crees what bad people these Lelacs are."

"Yes, Julie, we shall prove them liars and thieves; but the stain on the name of Jean Marcel will remain. I cannot deny that Antoine was killed; the Crees will not believe my story."

"Nonsense, Jean," she burst out, "you must make them believe you!"

"Julie," he said, ignoring her words, "since my return I have wanted to tell you—that I wish you all happiness,"—he swallowed hard at the lump in his throat,—"I have heard that you leave Whale River soon."

At the words the girl flushed but turned a level gaze on the man, who looked at the dim, blue shapes of the White Bear Hills far on the southern horizon.

"You have not heard the truth," she said. "Monsieur Wallace has done me the honor to ask me to marry him, but Monsieur Wallace is still a Protestant."

The words from Julie's own lips stung Marcel like the lash of a whip, but his face masked his emotion.

Then she went on:

"I wanted to talk to you last summer, for you are my dear friend, but you were here for so short a while and we had but a word when you left."

Then the girl burst out impulsively, "Ah, Jean; don't look that way! Won't you ever forgive me? I am—so sorry, Jean. But—you are a boy. It could never be that way. Why, you are as a brother."

Marcel's eyes still rested on the silhouetted hills to the south. He made no answer.

"Won't you forget, Jean, and remain a friend—a brother?"

He turned his sombre eyes to the girl.

"Yes, I shall always be your friend — your brother, Julie," he said. "But I shall always love you—I can't help that. And there is nothing to forgive. I hoped—once—that you might—love Jean Marcel; but now—it is over. God bless you, Julie!"

As he finished, Julie Breton's eyes were wet. Again Marcel gazed long into the south but with unseeing eyes. The girl was the first to break the silence.

"Jean," she said, returning to the charges of the Lelacs, "you must not brood over what the Crees are saying. What matters it that the ignorant Indians, some of whom, if the truth were known, have eaten their own flesh and blood in starvation camps, do not believe you. For shame! You are a brave man, Jean Marcel. Show your courage at Whale River as you have shown it elsewhere."

Sadly Marcel shook his head. "They will speak of me now, from Fort George to Mistassini, as the man who killed his partners." And in spite of Julie Breton's words of cheer he refused to see his case in any other light.

They had turned and were approaching the post when the practised eye of Marcel caught the far flash of paddles toward the river mouth. For a space he watched the rhythmic gleams of light from dripping blades leaving the water in unison, which alone marked the approaching canoe on the flat river. Then he said:

"There are four or six paddles. It must be a big Company boat from Fort George. I wonder what they come for during the trade."

As Jean and Julie Breton entered the post clearing the great red flag of the Company, carrying the white letters H. B. C., was broken out at the flagpole in honor of the approaching visitors. The canoe, now but a short way below the post, was receiving the undivided attention of Esquimos, Crees and howling huskies crowding the shore. The boat was not a freighter for she rode high. No one but an officer of the Company travelled light with six paddles. It was an event at Whale River, and Indians and white men awaited the arrival of the big Peterborough with unconcealed interest.

"It must be Inspector Wallace," said Jean.

With a face radiant with joy in the unexpected arrival of Wallace, Julie Breton hastened to the high shore, while Marcel turned slowly back to the Mission stockade where his dog awaited him at the gate.

As the canoe neared the beach the swart *voyageurs,* conscious of their Cree and Esquimo audience, put on a brave burst of speed. At each lunge of the narrow Cree blades, swung in unison with a straight arm, the craft buried its nose, pushing out a wide ripple. On they came spurred by the shouts from the shore, then at the order of the man in the bow, the crew raised their paddles and bow and stern men deftly swung the boat in to the Whale River landing amid the cheers of the Indians.

"How ar' yuh, Gillies?" said Wallace, stepping from the canoe; and, looking past the factor to a woman's figure on the high shore, waved his cap.

"Well, well, Mr. Wallace; we hardly expected to see you at Whale River so early," answered Gillies, drily, smiling at the eagerness of Wallace. "Anything happened to the steamer?"

"Oh, no! The steamer is all right. She'll be here on time. I thought I'd run up the coast during the trade this year."

Gillies winked surreptitiously at McCain. It was most peculiar for the Inspector of the East

Coast to arrive before the accounts of the spring trade were made up.

"How has the famine affected the fur with you, Gillies?" asked Wallace, as they proceeded up the cliff trail to the post clearing. "The Fort George and East Main people were hit pretty hard, a number of families wiped out."

"Yes, I expected as much," said Gillies. "A few of our people were starved out or died of disease. Nine, all told, have been reported, four of them old and feeble. It was a tough winter with both the rabbits and the caribou gone; we have done only fairly well with the trade, considering."

"What's this I hear about a murder by one of your Frenchmen?" Wallace suddenly demanded. "We met a canoe at the mouth of the river and heard that the bodies of two half-breeds who had met foul play were found this spring and that you have the third man here now?"

"That's pure Indian talk, Mr. Wallace," Gillies protested forcibly. "I will give you the details later. A half-breed killed one of his partners and attempted to kill the other, Jean Marcel, the son of André Marcel; you remember André, our old head man. You saw Jean here last summer. He is one of our best men. In fact, I'm going to take him on here at the post, although he's only a boy. He's too valuable to keep in the bush."

"Oh, yes! I remember him; friend of Father Breton. But we've got to put a stop to this promiscuous murder, Gillies. There's too much of this thing on the Bay, this killing and desertion in famine years, and no one punished for lack of evidence."

"But this was no murder, Mr. Wallace," Gillies answered hotly. "You'll hear the story to-night from Marcel's lips, if you like. We have some pretty strong evidence against his accusers, also. This is a tale started by the relatives of one of the men to cover their own thieving."

"Well, Gillies, your man may be innocent, but I want to catch one of these hunters who come into the posts with a tale of starvation as excuse for the disappearance of their partners or family. When the grub goes they desert, or do away with their people, and get off on their own story. I'd like to get some evidence against one of them. The government has sent pretty stiff orders to Moose for us to investigate these cases, and where we have proof, send the accused 'outside' for trial."

"When you've talked to him, Mr. Wallace, I think you'll agree that he tells a straight story and that these Lelacs are lying."

"I hope so," answered Wallace, and started for the Mission, where Julie Breton awaited him.

CHAPTER XXV

INSPECTOR WALLACE TAKES CHARGE

THAT night when Inspector Wallace had heard the story of the murders on the Ghost, he sent for Jean Marcel, to whom it was quite evident, on reporting at the trade-house, that the relations between the former and Gillies had recently become somewhat strained. The face of the Inspector was noticeably red and Gillies' heavy brows contracted over eyes blazing with wrath.

"Sit down!" said the Inspector as Marcel reported. "Now, Marcel," Wallace began, severely, "this case looks pretty bad for you. You go into the bush in the fall with two partners, and the body of one is found with a knife wound, together with the effects of the other, in the spring."

"Yes, M'sieu!" assented Jean.

"You say Piquet killed Beaulieu and was killed by your dog when he attacked you. All right! But suppose when you began to starve you had killed Beaulieu and Piquet to get the remaining grub, how would that, if it had happened, have changed the evidence at the camp?"

"De bodee of Antoine on de cache," replied Jean coolly, "proves to any smart man dat I did not keel heem. Eef I keel heem I would geeve de bodee to de lynx and wolverines out in de snow. Den I would say he died of de famine, lak de Cree do, and no one could deny it."

Marcel's narrowed eyes bored into those of the Inspector. He tried to forget that before him sat the man who had taken from him all he held dear, this man who now had it in his power to dishonor him as well—send him south for trial among strangers.

"Well, the Lelacs say you did hide the body. But suppose you left it on the cache. You were safe. Why should anyone come to your camp and see it? You were two days' travel up the Ghost from Whale River. They surprised you while you were away hunting."

With a look of disgust but retaining his self-control, Jean answered: "Eet was a ver' hard winter. De Cree were starve' and knew we camp up de Ghost. Dey might come tru de bush for grub any tam. Eef I keel heem would I wait till spring to hide him under stones, as Lelac say?"

"Um!" The face of Inspector Wallace assumed a judicial expression. "The circumstantial evidence is against you. Of course, you have something in your favor, but if I were on a jury I'd have to convict you," Wallace said with an air of finality.

"One moment, Mr. Wallace," growled Gillies.

"How about the previous reputation of Marcel and the character of the whole Lelac tribe? Hasn't that got any weight with you? I believe this boy because I've always found him honest and straight, as his father was. We thought a lot of his father on this coast. I don't believe the Lelacs because they always were liars. But you've missed the real point of the whole matter."

"What do you mean? The case is clear as a bell to me, Gillies." The Inspector colored, frowning on the stiff-necked factor.

"Why, putting the previous reputation, here, of Marcel aside, if he had killed Beaulieu, would he have told us that Beaulieu was stabbed? Clearly not! He would have said that Antoine died of starvation and was not stabbed, for as soon as he heard they had not turned in the fur, he knew he had the Lelacs in his power and could prove them thieves and liars, and we all would have believed him. The story of the Lelacs as to the man having been murdered would not have held water a minute after the hearing proves them thieves.

"Furthermore, he knew they could not prove their tale by the body of Beaulieu, either, left to rot on the shore there in the spring freshets. There would be no evidence for a canoe from the post to find." The Scotchman rose and pounded the slab table as he drove home his final point.

"Why, Jean Marcel had it in his power, if he had been guilty, to have walked out of this trouble by simply giving the Lelacs the lie. But what did he do? He told his tale to Père Breton, here, before he learned what the Lelacs had said.

"He freely admitted that Beaulieu had been stabbed when he might have denied it and got off scot free. Does that look like a guilty man? Answer me that!" thundered Gillies to his superior officer.

The force of Gillies' argument was not lost on the unreceptive Wallace.

The stone-hard features of Marcel reflected no emotion but deep in his heart smoldered a hatred of this Inspector of the Company, who, not satisfied with taking Julie Breton from him, now flouted his honor as a Marcel and a man.

"Well?" demanded Gillies, impatiently, his frank glance holding the pale eyes of Wallace.

"Yes, what you say, Gillies, has its weight, no doubt. If he had wanted to avoid this thing, he might have done it, when he learned that the Lelacs had held the fur. Still, I'll think it over. It may be best to send him 'outside' to be tried, as a warning to these people. I can't seem to swallow that tale of the dog killing Piquet, however. Sounds fishy to me!"

"Have you seen the dog?" demanded Gillies.

"No!"

"Well, when you see her, you won't doubt it. She's the most powerful husky I've ever seen—weighs a hundred and forty pounds. She's got a litter due soon."

"Oh, I'd like to take a pup or two back with me."

"Well, you'll have to see Marcel about that," chuckled Gillies. "Her pups are worth a black fox skin. We'll have this hearing to-morrow, then, if it's agreeable to you, Mr. Wallace. When you see the Lelacs you may understand why we believe so strongly in Marcel."

As Wallace went out, Gillies drew Jean aside.

"I have little faith in Inspector Wallace, Jean. He would send you south for trial if he could find sufficient reason for it."

"M'sieu Gillies, Jean Marcel will never go south to be tried by strange men for the thing he did not do."

"What do you mean, my son? You would not make yourself an outlaw? It would be better to go."

"I shall not go, M'sieu." And Colin Gillies believed in his heart that Marcel spoke the truth.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE WHELPS OF THE WOLF

THE following morning Jean Marcel forgot the cloud hanging over him in his joy at the event which had taken place since dawn. Rousing Julie and her brother, he led them to the stockade. There in all the pride of motherhood lay the great Fleur with five blind, roly-poly puppies, whimpering at her side.

"Oh, the little dears!" cried Julie. "How pretty they are!"

First speaking to Fleur and patting her head, Jean picked up a squirming ball of fur and as the mother whined anxiously, put it in Julie's arms.

"Oh, mon cher!" cried the girl, nestling the warm little body to her cheek. "What a morsel of softness!" But when Père Breton reached to touch the puppy a rumble from Fleur's deep throat warned him that Julie alone was privileged to take such liberties with her offspring.

Jean quieted the anxious mother, whose nose sought his hand. "See, Father, what a dog-team she has given me."

One after another he proudly exhibited the puppies. "Mark the bone of their legs. They will make a famous team with Fleur as leader. Is it not so?"

"They are a possession to be proud of, Jean," agreed the priest, standing discreetly out of reach, for Fleur's slant eyes never left him.

"Which of them do you wish, Julie?" Jean asked. "One, you know, is for you."

"Oh, Jean; you are too good!" cried the girl. "I should love this one, marked like Fleur," and she stooped to take the whimpering puppy in her arms, while Jean's hand rested on Fleur's massive head, lest the fear of the mother dog for the safety of her offspring should overpower her friendship for Julie.

As the girl fearlessly reached and lifted the puppy, Fleur suddenly thrust forward her long muzzle and licked her hand.

"*Bon!*" cried Jean, delighted. "Fleur would allow no one on earth to do that except you. The puppy's name must be Julie."

In his joy at the coming of Fleur's family Marcel had forgotten, for the time being, the hearing. But later in the morning at the trade-house, Gillies, whose obstinacy had been deeply aroused by the attitude of Inspector Wallace, planned with the accused man how they should handle the Lelacs.

For the factor had no intention of permitting

Jean's exoneration to hang in the balance of the prejudiced mind of Wallace. The canny Scot realized that if the Lelacs were thoroughly discredited at the hearing at which the leaders of the Crees would be present; were shown to have an ulterior motive in their attempt to fix the crime upon Marcel, there would be a strong reaction in favor of Jean—that his story would be generally accepted; so to this end he carefully laid his plans. Wallace, busy prying into the books of the post, he did not take into his confidence, wishing to surprise him as well as the Crees by the bomb-shell the defense had in store for the Lelacs.

At noon Wallace overheard Jules and McCain talking of Fleur's puppies which they had just seen.

"By the way, McCain, where are these remarkable Ungava pups which you say were sired by a timber wolf?"

"Over in the Mission stockade, sir."

"I want to see them and the old dog, too. I'm rather curious to put my eyes on the husky that could kill a man with a loaded gun in his hands. That part of Marcel's story needs a bit of salt."

"You won't doubt it when you see her! She's a whale of a husky," said McCain.

"Well, I never saw the dog that could kill me with a rifle handy. I'll stroll over and take a look at her."

"I'll show you the way." And McCain and Wallace went to the Mission.

Arrived at the tent in the stockade they were greeted by a fierce rumble, like the muttering of an August south-wester making on the Bay.

"We'd better not go near the tent, Mr. Wallace. I'll see if Jean's in the house. The dog won't allow anyone but Marcel near her."

Ignoring the warning, Wallace approached the tent opening to look inside, but so fierce a snarl warned him off that he stepped back with considerably more speed than his dignity admitted. Red in the face, he glanced around to learn if his precipitous flight had had an audience.

Shortly, McCain returned with Marcel, and Wallace, now that the dog's owner was near, again approached and peered into the tent.

There was a deep growl from within, and with a cry of surprise the Inspector was hurled backward to the ground by the rush of a great, gray body. At the same instant, Jean Marcel, calling to Fleur, leaped headlong at his dog, seizing her before she could strike at the neck of the prostrate Wallace. Calming the husky, he held her while the discomfited Inspector got to his feet.

"You should not go so near, M'sieu. She ees not use to stranger," said Jean brusquely.

"I—I didn't think she was so cross," sputtered the ruffled Inspector. "Why, she's a regular wolf of a dog!"

"Now, sir," demanded the secretly delighted McCain, "do you believe she could kill a man?"

Surveying Fleur's gigantic frame critically as Jean stroked her glossy neck, soothing her with low words crooned into a hairy ear, the enlightened Inspector of the East Coast posts admitted:

"Well, I don't know but what she could. I never saw such a beast for size and strength. Let's have a look at the pups."

Jean brought from the tent the blind, squirming balls of fur.

"They are beauties, Marcel! I'll buy a couple of them. They can go down by the steamer if they're weaned by that time. What do you want for them?"

Marcel smiled inscrutably at Inspector Wallace and said:

"M'sieu, dese pups are not to sell."

"I know, but you don't want all of them. That would give you six dogs. All you need for a team is four."

But Jean Marcel only shook his head, repeating:

"Dey are not to sell!"

CHAPTER XXVII

THE TRAP IS SPRUNG

THE trading-room at Whale River was crowded with the treaty chiefs and older men among the Cree hunters chosen by the factor to be present at the hearing. Behind a huge table made from hewn spruce slabs, sat Inspector Wallace, Colin Gillies and McCain. In front and to one side were the swart half-breeds, Gaspard Lelac and his two sons. Facing them on the opposite side of the table was Jean Marcel, and behind him, his advisor, Père Breton, with Julie; for she had insisted on being present, and the smitten Wallace had readily agreed. The remainder of the room was occupied by the Crees, expectant, consumed with curiosity, for it had leaked out that certain matters connected with the tragedy on the Ghost which, heretofore, had not been divulged, would that afternoon be given light.

Among the assembled half-breeds and Crees there were two distinct factions. Those who had readily accepted the story of the Lelacs with its sinister indictment of Marcel, among whom were the kinsmen of Antoine Beaulieu; and those, who, knowing Jean

Marcel, as well as his unsavory accusers, had refused to accept the half-breeds' tale, and were waiting with eagerness to hear Marcel's defense; for as yet, Marcel, under orders from Gillies, had refused to discuss the case. Outside the trade-house, chattering groups of young men and Cree women were gathered, awaiting the outcome of the proceedings.

Rising, Colin Gillies called for silence and addressed the Crees in their picturesque tongue:

"The long snows have come and gone. Famine and suffering have again visited the hunters of Whale River. With the return of the rabbit plague, and the lack of deer, many of those who were here last year at the spring trade have gone to join their fathers. The Company is sad that its hunters and their families have suffered. Last autumn, three hunters went from this post to winter on the Ghost River. This spring but one returned. He is here now, for the reason that he travelled far into the great barrens to streams which join the Big Water many, many sleeps to the northeast, where at last he found the returning deer.

"This spring, when the Ghost was free of ice, Gaspard Lelac and his sons, wishing to visit their kinsman, Joe Piquet, travelled to the camp of the three hunters. What they found there they will now tell as they told it to me when they came to Whale River. After you have learned their story, Jean Marcel, the man who returned, will relate what happened on the Ghost under the moons of the long snows.

"The Company has sent to visit Whale River its chief of the East Coast, Inspector Wallace. He will hear the stories of these men and decide which of them speaks with a double tongue. It is for you, also, when they have spoken, to say whether Gaspard Lelac and his sons bring the truth to Whale River, or Jean Marcel. You know these men. Hear their talk and judge in your hearts between them. Gaspard Lelac has put the blood of Antoine Beaulieu and Joe Piquet on the head of Jean Marcel. The fathers at Ottawa and the Chiefs of the Company at Winnipeg will not suffer one of their children to go unpunished who takes the life of another.

"Listen to the speech of these men. Look with your eyes into their faces and upon what will be shown here, and judge who speaks with a double tongue and who from an honest heart. Gaspard Lelac will now tell what he saw and did."

As Gillies finished, a murmur of approval filled the room, followed by a tense silence.

Lelac, a grizzled French half-breed with small, closely-set eyes, which shifted here and there as he spoke, then rose and told in the Cree tongue the story he had retailed daily for the previous month.

Wishing to visit his nephew Piquet, he said, and learn how he had weathered the hard winter, in May Lelac and his sons had poled up the Ghost to the camp. There they found an empty cache and part of the outfits of Beaulieu and Piquet, the latter of which they at once recognized. Alarmed, they searched the vicinity of the camp, and by chance, discovered the body of Beaulieu buried under stones on the shore. There was a knife wound in his chest. They continued the search in hope of finding Piquet, as his blankets and outfit, evidently unused for months and eaten by mice, were strong proof of his death, also; but failed to find the body. Of the fur-packs and rifles of the two men there was no trace, but a knife, identified later as belonging to Antoine, they brought back. There were no signs of the third man's outfit about the camp. If the third man was alive, what were they to believe? Antoine was dead, and Piquet, also, for his blankets were there. Someone had killed Antoine and Piquet. There was but one other, Marcel. So they travelled to Whale River with the news.

The sons of Lelac glibly corroborated the story of their father. When they had finished, the trade-room buzzed with whispered comment.

At a nod from Wallace, Gillies questioned the older Lelac in Cree for the benefit of the Indians.

"You say that these blankets here, this knife and cooking kit, and the clothes and bags, were all that you found at the camp—that there were no fur and rifles on the cache? "

" These were all we found—nothing else," replied Lelac, his small eyes wavering before the gaze of the factor.

" You swear that you found nothing but these things," repeated Gillies, pointing to the articles on the floor in front of the table.

" Nothing."

The set face of Jean Marcel, which had remained expressionless during the Lelacs' statement, relaxed in a wide smile which did not escape many a shrewd pair of Cree eyes.

" Jean Marcel will now relate what passed on the Ghost through the moons of the long snows."

With the announcement, there was much stirring and shuffling of moccasins accompanied by suppressed exclamations and muttering, among the expectant Crees. But when Marcel rose, squared his wide shoulders, and with head high ran his eyes over the assembled Crees, friendly and hostile, to rest at length on the Lelacs, his lips curled with an expression of contempt, while the Indians and breeds relapsed into silence.

Slowly, and in detail, Jean told in the Cree language how his partners had gone up-river when he started south on the trail of the dog-thieves; how he recaptured Fleur, and later reached the Ghost at the "freeze-up." The tale of his nine-hundred-mile journey to the south coast drew many an "Ah-hah!" of mingled surprise and admiration from those who remembered Marcel's voyage of the previous spring through the spirit-haunted valleys of the Salmon headwaters. With his familiarity with the Cree mental make-up and his French instinct for dramatic values, he held them breathless by the narration of this Odyssey of the north.

Then Marcel described the long weeks when the three men fought starvation, with the deer and rabbits gone; how he travelled far into the land of the Windigo in search of beaver; and finally, he came to the break with his partners. The hard feeling which developed at the camp on the Ghost, Jean made no attempt to gloss over, but boldly told how the others had not played fair with the food, and he had left them to fight out the winter alone. Of the death of Piquet he spoke as one speaks of the extermination of vermin. An assassin in the night, Piquet had come to the tent of a sleeping man and the dog alone had saved his life.

They called his dog the "man-killer." Would they have asked less of their own huskies? he demanded. But if any of them doubted, and he understood that the Lelacs were among these, that his dog could have killed Piquet, let them come to the tent in the Mission stockade by night—and learn for themselves.

"*Nama*, no!" some Indian audibly protested, and for a space the room was a riot of laughter, for the Crees had seen Fleur, the "man-killer."

But when the narrative of Marcel reached the discovery of the dead Antoine, stabbed to the heart in the shack on the Ghost, his voice broke with emotion. When he had found Antoine, killed in his sleep by Piquet, Marcel said that he had bitterly regretted that he had not taken Beaulieu with him, leaving Piquet to work out his own fate.

Then Jean described how he had lashed the body of Antoine, sewed in a tent, on the platform cache, and placed the fur-packs and rifles beside it, when he left to go into the barrens for deer. Turning, the Frenchman pointed his finger at the scowling Lelacs, and cried dramatically, "When you came to the camp this spring, you did not find the body of Antoine Beaulieu buried on the shore; you found it on the cache sewed in a tent. If I had killed him would I not have hidden him somewhere in the snow where the starving lynx and wolverines would have done the rest? No, you found Antoine on the cache, and beside him were his rifle and fur-pack with those of Joe Piquet. What did you do with them?"

His evil face distorted with rage, the elder Lelac snarled:

"You lie, you got de fur and rifle hid."

Suppressing the half-breeds, Wallace ordered Marcel to continue.

Jean finished his story with the account of his long journey into the barrens beyond the Height-of-Land where the streams flowed northeast instead of west, his meeting with the returning deer, when weak with starvation, and his return to the Ghost to find that a canoe had preceded him there.

As he resumed his seat, the eyes of Julie Breton were bright with tears. The priest leaned and grasped Jean's hand, whispering: "Well done, Jean Marcel!"

It had been a dramatic narration and the audience, including Inspector Wallace to whom it was interpreted by Gillies, had been impressed by the frank and fearless manner of its telling.

Angus McCain and big Jules smiled widely as they caught Marcel's eyes.

Again Gillies rose. "Jules!" he called, and Duroc brought from an adjoining room a bundle of pelts, placing them on the long table.

Again the room hummed with the whispering of the curious audience. The surprised Lelacs, now in a panic, talked excitedly, heads together.

"Marcel, examine these pelts and if you notice anything about them, make a statement," said Gillies, conducting the examination for the benefit of the Crees, in their native tongue, and translating to Wallace.

With great care, as his Cree audience craned their necks to watch what the Frenchman was doing, Jean, first examining each pelt, slowly divided the bundle of skins into three separate heaps.

"Have you anything to say?"

"Yes, M'sieu. This large pile here, I know nothing about; but this heap here, were all pelts trapped last winter by Antoine Beaulieu."

A murmur passed through the crowded room. Here surely was something of interest. Lelac rose and started to look at the pelts when big Jules pushed him roughly back on the bench.

"You stay where you are, Lelac, or I'll put a guard over you!" rasped Gillies.

"This pile here," continued Jean, "belonged to Joe Piquet."

"How do you recognize them?" demanded Gillies.

"All these have Antoine's mark, one little slit behind the right fore-leg. These with two slits behind the left fore-leg were the pelts of Piquet. My mark was three slits in front of the left hind leg. When we started trapping from the same camp, we agreed on these marks."

The air of the trade-room was heavy with suspense.

"You swear to these marks?"

"Yes, M'sieu."

"François Maskigan!" The treaty-chief of the South Branch Crees, a man of middle age, with great authority among the Indians, stepped forward.

"François, you have heard what Marcel says of the marks on these skins?"

The chief nodded, "*Enh,* yes."

"Look at them and see if he speaks rightly."

It took the Indian but a few minutes to check the distinguishing marks on the pelts and examine the large pile which Marcel had said possessed none.

"Are the marks on these pelts as Marcel says?"

"Yes, they are there, these marks as he says."

The cowed Lelacs, their dark faces now twisted with fear, awaited the next words of Gillies. Then the irate factor turned on them.

"Gaspard Lelac!" he roared. The face of Lelac paled to a sickly white as his furtive eyes met the factor's.

"All this fur, here, you and your sons traded in last week; your own fur, and the pelts of Beaulieu and Joe Piquet, dead men. I have held them separate from the rest. You are thieves and liars!"

The bomb had exploded. At the words of the factor, the trade-room became a bedlam of chattering and excited Indians. In the north, to steal the fur of another is one of the cardinal sins. The supporters of Marcel loudly exulted in the turn the hearing had taken, while the deluded adherents of the Lelacs, maddened by the villainy of men who had stolen from the dead and accused another, loudly cursed the half-breeds.

Nonplussed, paralyzed by the trick of the factor, instigated by the adroit Marcel, the Lelacs sent murderous looks at Jean who smiled contemptuously in their faces.

Gillies' deep bass quieted the uproar.

"Jules!" he called the second time. All were on tiptoe to learn what further surprise the stalwart Jules had in store for them, when he entered the room with two rifles, which he laid on the table, while the Lelacs stared in wide-eyed amazement.

"Where did you get these rifles?" asked Gillies.

"In the tepee of Lelac, just now, hidden under blankets."

"Whose rifles were they, Marcel?"

Marcel examined the guns.

"This 30-30 gun belonged to Piquet. This is the rifle of Antoine."

With a cry, a tall half-breed roughly shouldered his way to the front of the excited Crees.

"You thieves!" he cried, straining to reach the Lelacs with the knife which he held in his hand. But sinewy arms seized him and the frenzied uncle of Antoine Beaulieu was pushed, struggling, from the room.

It was the final straw. The mercurial Crees had turned as quickly from the Lelacs to Marcel as, in the first instance, they had credited the tale of the half-breeds. Now, with the Lelacs proven liars and thieves, Jean's explanation of the deaths of his partners, as Gillies foresaw, had, without corroboration, and on his word as a man, only, been at once accepted.

Calling for silence Gillies again spoke to the hunters.

"You have heard the words of these men. You have judged who has spoken with a double tongue; who, with the guns of dead men hidden in a tepee, have traded their fur and put their blood upon the head of another. Do you believe Jean Marcel when he says that Piquet killed Antoine Beaulieu and went out to kill him also, or do you believe the men who stole the guns and fur of a dead man which belong to his kinsmen?"

"*Enh! Enh!* Jean Marcel speaks truth!" cried the Crees, and the chattering mob poured into the post clearing to carry the news to the curious young men and the women, who waited.

Meanwhile Père Breton embraced the happy Marcel while the unchecked tears welled in Julie's eyes. Then Gillies and McCain wrung the Frenchman's hand until he grimaced. But the big Jules, patiently waiting his turn, pounced upon Jean with a fierce hug and, in spite of his protests carrying him like a child in his great arms from the trade-house, showed the man they had maligned, to the Crees, who now loudly cheered him.

Turning to Gillies, the Inspector said gravely: "These Lelacs go south for trial. I'll make an example of their thieving."

But Colin Gillies had no intention of having the half-breeds sent "outside" for trial, if he could prevent it. It would mean that Jean and he, himself, with Jules, would have to go as witnesses. He could take care of the Lelacs in his own way. He had punished men before.

"That would leave us very short-handed here. The famine has reduced the trade this year a third. If we want to make a showing next season, we can't spend six months travelling down below for a trial."

"Yes, that would mean your going and we can't afford to injure the trade; but I ought to make a report on this murder business in famine years."

"If you get the government into this, it will hurt us, Mr. Wallace. Why can't we handle this matter as we have handled it for two centuries?" protested Gillies. "A report will only place the Company in a bad light—make them think we can't control the Crees."

"Well, perhaps you're right," admitted Wallace. "I'm out to make a showing on the East Coast and I don't want to handicap you."

So Gillies had his way.

CHAPTER XXVIII

BITTER-SWEET

To Jean Marcel it had been a happy moment—that of his exoneration by the hunters of Whale River. For weeks, with rage in his heart, he had silently borne the black looks of the Crees whom he could not avoid in going to his net and crossing the post clearing to the trade-house. For weeks his name had been a byword at the spring trade—Marcel, the man who had murdered his partners. But now the stain of infamy had been washed clean from an honored name. In his humble grave in the Mission Cemetery, André Marcel could now sleep in peace, for in the eyes of the small world of the East Coast, his son had come scathless through the long snows. The tale would not now travel down the coast in the Inspector's canoe that another white man had turned murderer for the scanty food of his friends.

And with his acquittal by the Company and the Crees, his love for Julie Breton, more poignant from its very hopelessness, gave him no rest. As he struggled with renunciation, he brought himself to realize that, after all, it had been but presumption on his part to hope that this girl with her education of years in a Quebec convent, her acquaintance with the ways of the great world "outside," should look upon a humble Company hunter as a possible husband. He had all along mistaken her kindness, her friendship, for something more which she had never felt. In comparison with Wallace who, Jean had heard Gillies say, might some day go to Winnipeg as Assistant Commissioner of the Company, he was as nothing. Doomed by his inheritance and his training to a life beyond the pale of civilization, he could offer Julie Breton little but a love that knew no bounds, no frontiers; that would find no trail, which led to her, too long; no water too vast; no height too sheer; to separate them, did she but call him.

So, in the hour of his triumph, the soul-sick Marcel went to one who never had failed him; who loved him with a singleness of heart but rarely paralleled by human kind; who, however humble his lot, would give him the worship accorded to no king—his dog.

Seated beside Fleur with her squealing children crawling over him, he circled her great neck with his arms and told his troubles to a hairy ear. She sought his hand with her tongue, her throat rumbling with content, for had she not there on the grass in the soft June sun, all her world—her puppies and her God, Jean Marcel?

There, Julie Breton, having in vain announced supper from the Mission door, found them, man and dog, and led Marcel away, protesting. The girl wore the frock she had donned in honor of his return, and never to Jean had she seemed so vibrant with life, never had the color bathed her dark face so exquisitely, nor the tumbled masses of her hair so allured him. But as he entered the Mission, he saw Inspector Wallace seated in conversation with the priest, and his heart went cold.

During the meal, served by a Cree woman, the admiring eyes of Wallace seldom left Julie's face. At first he seemed surprised at the presence of Marcel at the table but the priest made it quite evident to the Company man that Jean was as one of the family. However, as the Frenchman rarely joined in the conversation and early excused himself, leaving Wallace a free field, the Inspector's temper at what might have seemed presumption in a Company hunter was unmarred.

July came and to the surprise of Gillies and Whale River, the big Company canoe still remained under its tarpaulin on the post landing. That the priest looked kindly on the possibility of such a brother-in-law was evident from his hospitality to Wallace, but what piqued the curiosity of Colin

Gillies and McCain was whether Wallace, a Scotch Protestant, had as yet accepted the Catholic faith, for the Oblat, Père Breton, could not marry his sister to a man of another religious belief. However, deep in the spell of the charming Julie, Inspector Wallace stayed on after the trade was over, giving as his reason his desire to go south with the Company steamer which shortly would be due.

Although to Jean she was the same merry Julie, each morning visiting the stockade to play with Fleur's puppies, who now had their eyes well open and were beginning to find an uncertain balance, he avoided her, rarely seeing her except at meal time. Of the change in their relations he never spoke, but man-like he was hurt that she failed to take him to task for his moodiness. In the evening, now, she walked on the river-shore with Wallace, and talked through the twilight when the sun lingered below the rim of the world in the west. Jean Marcel had gone out of her life. He ceased to mention the Inspector's name, and absented himself from meals when the Scotchman was expected.

Julie had said: "Jean, you are one of us, always welcome. Why do you stay away when Monsieur Wallace comes?" And he had answered: "You know why I stay away, Julie Breton."

That was all.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE FANGS OF THE HALF-BREEDS

ONE night when Jean returned late from his nets after a long paddle, seeking the exhaustion that would bring sleep and temporary respite from his grief, a canoe manned by three men drifted alongshore toward his beached canoe. Occupied with his thoughts, Marcel took no notice of the craft. Removing from the boat the fish he had caught, he was about to lift and place it bottom up on the beach when the bow of the approaching birch-bark suddenly swung sharply and jammed into the stern of his own.

With an exclamation of irritation at the clumsiness of the people in the offending canoe, Jean looked up to stare into the faces of the three Lelacs.

"You are good canoeman," he sneered, roughly pushing with his paddle the half-breeds' canoe from his own. That the act was intentional, he knew, but he was surprised that the Lelacs, convicted of theft, and on parole at the post awaiting the Company's decision as to their punishment, would dare to start trouble.

As Jean shoved off the Lelacs' canoe, the half-breeds, as if at a preconcerted signal, shouted loudly:

"W'at you do to us, Jean Marcel? Ough! Why you beat me wid de paddle? He try to keel us!"

The near beach was deserted, but the shouts in the still night were audible on the post clearing above. The uproar waked the sleeping huskies at the few remaining Esquimo tepees on the shore, whose howling quickly aroused the post dogs.

It was evident to Jean that his enemies had chosen their time and place. Obeying scrupulously the orders of Gillies since the trial, Marcel had avoided the Lelacs, holding in check the just wrath which had prompted him to take personal vengeance upon his traducers. Now, instead, they had sought him, but from their actions, intended to make him seem the aggressor.

"Bon!" he muttered between his teeth. Life had little value to him now, he would give these thieves what they were after.

"You 'fraid to come on shore? You squeal lak' rabbit; you t'ief!" he taunted.

Continuing to shout that Marcel was attacking them, the Lelacs landed their canoe and the elder son, evidently drunk, lurched toward the man who waited.

"Rabbit, am I?" roared the frenzied half-breed, and struck savagely at Jean with his paddle.

Dodging the blow, before the breed could recover his balance, the Frenchman lunged with his one hundred and seventy pounds behind his fist into Lelac's jaw, hurling him reeling into the water ten feet away. Then the two Lelacs reached him.

Gasping for breath, the younger brother fell backward, helpless from a kick in the pit of his stomach as the maddened Marcel grappled with the father. Over and over they rolled on the beach, Lelac, frenzied by drink, snarling with hate of the man he had tried to destroy, fighting like a trapped wolverine; the no less infuriated Marcel resolved now to rid Whale River forever of this vermin.

It was not long before the bands of steel cable which swathed the arms, shoulders and back of Jean Marcel overcame the delirious strength of the crazed half-breed, and Lelac was forced down and held on his back. Then like the jaws of a wolf-trap, the fingers of Marcel's right hand shut on the throat of the under man. The bloodshot eyes of Lelac bulged from their sockets. Blood filled the distorted face. The mouth gaped for air, barred by the vise on his throat. In a last feeble effort to free himself, a helpless hand clawed limply at Marcel's wrist—then he relaxed, unconscious, on the beach.

Getting to his feet, Jean looked for the others, to see the younger brother still nursing his stomach, when an oath sounded in his ears and, struck from the rear, a sharp twinge bit through his shoulder, as he stumbled forward.

Leaping away from a second lunge, and drawing his knife with his left hand, Marcel slashed wildly, driving before him the half-breed whom the water had revived. Then, as he fought to reach him, the shape of his retreating enemy slowly faded from Marcel's vision; his strength ebbed; the knife slipped from his fingers as darkness shut down upon him, and he reeled senseless to the stones.

With a snarl of triumph, Lelac, crouched on the defensive, sprang to the crumpled figure, a hand raised to drive home the knife-thrust, when something sang shrilly through the air. The upraised arm fell. With a groan, the half-breed pitched on his face, the slender shaft of a seal-spear quivering in his back.

Close by, a kayak silently slid to the shore and a squat Husky, his broad face knotted with fear, ran to the unconscious Marcel. Swiftly cutting the shirt from the Frenchman's back, he was staunching the flow of blood from the knife wound, when people from the post clearing, headed by Jules Duroc, reached the beach.

"By Gar! Jean Marcel!" gasped Jules recognizing his friend. "He ees cut bad?"

The Husky shook his head. "He not kill."

Staring at the dead man transfixed by the spear and his unconscious father, Jules roared: “De t’ief, dey try *revanche* on Jean Marcel!”

Stripping off his own shirt, Jules bandaged Marcel’s shoulder. As he worked, one thing he told himself. Had they killed Marcel, the Lelacs would not have gone south for trial. Father and son would never have left the beach at Whale River alive.

Then he said to the gathering Crees, “Tak’ dem!” pointing to the younger Lelac now shedding maudlin tears over his dead brother, and to the half-choked father, resuscitated by a rough immersion in the river from unfriendly hands. Seizing the pair, rapidly sobering and now fearful for their fate, the Crees kicked them up the cliff trail.

“Tiens!” exclaimed Jules to the Husky, finishing the bandaging. “Dey try keel Marcel but he lay out two w’en he get de cut?”

The Husky nodded, “A-hah! I hear holler an’ dey run on heem. He put all down. One in water, he get up an’ cut heem wid knife. He fall and, whish! I spear dat one.”

“By Gar! You good man wid de seal-spear, John Kovik.” And Jules wrung the Esquimo’s hand.

“I cum fast een kayak to fight for heem; I too slow,” and the Husky shook his head sadly.

"Ah, you cum jus' een time. You save hees life."

The Husky placed a hand on the thick hair of the senseless man, as he said, "He ketch boy, Salmon Rive'. He frien' of me!"

Jean Marcel's bread upon the waters had returned to him.

With the unconscious Marcel in his arms, Jules Duroc climbed the cliff, the grateful Kovik at his heels, to meet the inhabitants of Whale River on the clearing. The news of the fight on the beach had spread swiftly through the post and many and fierce were the threats made against the Lelacs as they were shut in a small shack and placed under guard.

In front of the trade-house, Gillies, followed by McCain and Wallace, met Jules with his burden.

"How did this happen, Jules? Is he badly hurt?" demanded the factor. Jules explained briefly.

"Stabbed in the back? Too bad! Too bad! Take him to the Mission Hospital."

"Well, Gillies, this settles it! The Lelacs go south for trial, now, and they won't need you as a witness either," announced Wallace.

"Yes, we'll have to get rid of them," admitted the factor. "They were crazy to do this after what has happened. I should have shut them up. Too bad Jean didn't use his knife instead of his hands on them!"

"Or his feet!" added McCain. "The Husky says he put one Lelac out of business with a kick and choked the old man unconscious, when the one who was knocked into the river stabbed him. He fought them with his bare hands. I take off my hat to Jean Marcel."

"Who started this affair, anyway?" asked Wallace. "The Lelacs, under a cloud here, couldn't have dared to."

Gillies turned on his chief.

"What do we care who started it? Haven't they tried to ruin Marcel? I ordered him to keep away from them, but didn't he have sufficient cause to start—anything?"

"The Crees say the Lelacs got drunk on sugar-beer and were waiting for Jean to get back from down river," broke in McCain, fearing a row between Gillies and the Inspector. "John Kovik, the Husky, saw them rush him, and John got there in time to throw his seal-spear at young Lelac, after he had stabbed Marcel from behind."

"Oh, that explains it; Marcel was defending himself," said the ruffled Inspector.

"Yes, and you will notice, Mr. Wallace," rasped Gillies, "that Marcel fought them with his hands, until he was cut, one man against three. If he had used his knife on the old man, he wouldn't have been hurt. Does that prove what we've told you about him?"

It was at this point that Julie Breton and her brother, late in hearing the news, reached Jules carrying his burden, whose bandages were now reddening with blood.

"Oh, Jules, is he badly hurt?" cried the girl, peering in the dusk at the ashen face of Marcel. Then she noticed the bandages, and putting her hands to her face, moaned: "Jean Marcel, what have they done to you; what have they done to you?"

"Eet bleed hard, Ma'm'selle," Jules said softly, "but eet ees onlee een de shouldair. Don' cry, Ma'm'selle Julie!"

Supporting the sobbing girl, Père Breton ordered:

"Carry him to the Mission, Jules."

"Yes, Father!" And Jean Marcel returned again to a room in the Mission.

Tenderly rough hands bathed and dressed the knife wound and through the night Père Breton sat by his patient, who moaned and tossed in the delirium which the fever brought.

CHAPTER XXX

CREE JUSTICE

DEEP in the night a long, mournful howl, repeated again and again, roused the sleeping post. Straightway the dogs of the factor and the Crees, followed by the Esquimos' huskies on the beach, were pointing their noses at the moon in dismal chorus. With muttered curse and protest from tepee, shack and factor's quarters, the wakened people of the post, covering their ears, sought sleep, for no hour is sacred to the moon-baying husky and no one may suppress him. One wakes, and lifting his nose, pours out his canine soul in sleep-shattering lament, when, promptly, every husky within hearing takes up the wail.

The post dogs, having alternately and in chorus, to their hearts' content and according to the custom of their fathers, transformed the calm July night into a horror of sound, with noses buried in bushy tails again sought sleep. Once more the mellow light of the moon bathed the sleeping fur-post, when from the stockade behind the Mission rose a long drawn note of grief.

The dark brows of Père Breton, watching beside the delirious Marcel, contracted.

"Could it be?" he queried aloud. Curious, the priest glanced at his patient, then went outside to the stockade. There, with gray nose thrust between the pickets, stood Fleur. As he approached, the dog growled, then sniffing, recognized a friend of the master, who sometimes fed her, and whined.

"What is the matter, Fleur? Do you miss Jean Marcel?"

At the mention of the loved name, the dog lifted her massive head and the deep throat again vibrated with the utterance of her grief for one who had not returned.

"She has waked to find the blanket of Jean Marcel empty," mused the priest, "and mourns for him." Père Breton returned to his vigil beside the wounded man.

When the early dawn flushed the east, the grieving Fleur was still at her post at the stockade gate awaiting the return of Jean Marcel. And not until the sun lifted above the blue hills of the valley of the Whale, did she cease her lament to seek her complaining puppies.

At daylight McCain and Jules coming to relieve the weary priest found Julie sitting with him. The wound was a long slashing one, but the lungs of Marcel seemed to have escaped. The fever would run its course. There was little to do but wait, and hope against infection.

Greeting Julie, whose dark eyes betrayed a lack of sleep, whose face reflected an agony of anxiety, the men called Père Breton outside the Mission.

"The Lelacs will not go south for trial, Father," said McCain, drily.

"What do you mean? Won't go south; why not?" demanded the astonished priest.

"Well, because there's no need of it now," went on McCain mysteriously.

"No need of it! I don't understand. They have done enough harm here. If they don't go, the Crees will do something ——"

"The Crees *have* done something," interrupted McCain.

"You don't mean ——" queried the priest, light slowly dawning upon him.

"Yes, just that. They overpowered and bound the guard, last night, and—well, they made a good job of it!"

"Killed the prisoners?" the priest slowly shook his head.

McCain nodded. "We found them both knifed in the heart. On the old man was a piece of birch-bark, with the words: 'This work done by friends of Jean Marcel.'"

The priest raised his hands. "It would have been better to send them south. Still, they were evil men, and deserved their fate. Tell nothing of it to Julie. She has taken this thing very hard."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE WAY OF A DOG

When Wallace and Gillies had surveyed the bodies of the dead half-breeds, the factor turned grimly to his chief.

"Well, Wallace, I don't see how we can send the Lelacs south for trial, now; they wouldn't keep that long."

"Gillies," said the Inspector with a frown, ignoring the ghastly witticism, "I want you to run down the men who did this. Whether they deserved it or not, I won't have men murdered in this district without trial. The lawlessness of the East Coast has got to stop."

Gillies turned away, suppressing with difficulty his anger. Shortly in control of his voice, he answered:

"Mr. Wallace, I have put in many years, boy and man, on this coast and I think I understand the Crees. To punish the men who did this, provided we knew who they were, would be the worst thing the Company could do. When the Lelacs stole Beaulieu's fur and rifle, they put themselves outside the Cree law, and as sure as the sun will set in

Hudson's Bay to-night, the Lelacs would never have got out of the bush alive this winter."

"I know," objected Wallace, "but to overpower our guards and kill them under our noses ——"

"What of it? The Lelacs had robbed a dead man and would have killed Jean Marcel, if he hadn't been a son of André Marcel, who was a wolf in a fight. The Lelacs were three-quarter Cree and the Indians here have a way of meting out justice to their own people in a case like this that even Canadian officials might envy. You may be sure that the Lelacs were formally tried and condemned in some tepee last night before this thing happened."

"These two guards must have been asleep," complained Wallace.

"Well, we'll never know, Mr. Wallace. They say that they were thrown from behind and didn't recognize the men who did it. Even if they did, they wouldn't tell who they were, and it's useless to try to make them. The Crees have taken the Lelacs off our hands. They have saved us time and money by ridding us of these vermin. In my opinion we should thank rather than attempt to punish them."

So Inspector Wallace slowly cooled off and in the afternoon went to the Mission to make his daily call on Julie Breton only to be informed, to his surprise, that she could not see him.

Meanwhile the condition of the wounded man was unchanged, but Père Breton faced a problem which he deemed necessary to discuss with his friends Jules Duroc and McCain.

Throughout the day, Fleur had fretted in the stockade, running back and forth followed by her complaining puppies, thrusting her nose between the pickets to whine and howl by turns, mourning the strange absence of Marcel.

"Fleur will not grant sleep to Whale River tonight, unless something is done," said the priest to the two men who were acting in turn as assistant nurses.

"Why can't we bring her in; let her see him and sniff his hand; it might quiet her?" suggested McCain. "It will only make her worse to shut her up somewhere else."

"By Gar! Who weel tak' dat dog out again?" objected Jules. "Once she here, she nevaire leeve de room."

"Yes, she will, Jules. She'll go back to her pups after a while. We'll bring them outside under the window and let 'em squeal. She'll go back to 'em then."

"I am strong man," said Jules, "but I not love to hold dat dog. She weel eat Jean Marcel, she so glad to see heem, an' we mus' keep her off de bed."

At that moment Julie entered the room. "I will take Fleur to see him; she will behave for me," volunteered the girl.

So not without serious misgivings, it was arranged that the grieving Fleur should be shown her master.

That night when Julie had fed Fleur, she opened the stockade gate and stroking the great head of the dog, said slowly:

"Fleur would see Jean, Jean Marcel?"

At the sound of the master's name, Fleur's ears went forward, her slant eyes turning here and there for a sight of the familiar figure. Then with a whine she looked at Julie as if for explanation.

"Fleur will see Jean, soon. Will Fleur behave for Julie?"

With a yelp the husky leaped through the gate and ran to and fro outside, sniffing the air; then as if she knew the master were not there, returned, shaggy body trembling, every nerve tense with anticipation, slant eyes eagerly questioning as she whimpered her impatience.

Taking the dog by her plaited collar of caribou hide, to it Julie knotted a rope and led her into the Mission where McCain, Jules and Père Breton waited.

"Fleur will be good and not hurt Jean. She must not leap on his bed. He is very sick."

Seeming to sense that something was about to happen having to do with Marcel, Fleur met the girl's hand with a swift lick of her tongue. With the rope trailing behind, the end of which Jules and McCain seized to control the dog in case she became unmanageable, Julie Breton opened the door of Marcel's room, where with fever-flushed face the unconscious man lay on a low cot, one arm hanging limply to the floor. When the husky saw the motionless figure, she pricked her ears, thrusting her muzzle forward, and sniffed, and as her nose revealed the glad news that here at last lay the lost Jean Marcel, she raised her head and yelped wildly. Then swiftly muzzling Marcel's inert body she started to spring upon the bunk to wake him, when Julie Breton's arms circled her neck and aided by the drag on the rope, checked her.

"Down, Fleur! No! No! You must not hurt Jean."

Seeming to sense that the mute Marcel was not to be roughly played with, the intelligent dog, whimpering like one of her puppies, caressed the free hand of the sick man, then, ignoring the weight on the rope dragging her back, she strained forward to reach his neck with her tongue, for his head was turned from her. But Jean Marcel did not return her caress.

Puzzled by his indifference, then sensing that harm had come to the unconscious Marcel, the dog raised her head over the cot and rocked the room with a wail of sorrow.

The wounded man sighed and turning, moaned:

"They took Fleur and now they take Julie. There is nothing left—nothing left!"

At the words, the nose of the overjoyed dog reached the hot face of Marcel, but his eyes did not see her.

Again Julie's strong arms circled Fleur's neck, restraining her. The slant eyes of the husky looked long into the pale face which showed no recognition; then she quietly sat down, resting her nose on his arm. And for hours, with Julie seated beside her, Fleur kept vigil beside the bed, until the priest and McCain insisted on the dog's removal.

When Jules brought a crying puppy outside the window of the sick room, for a time Fleur listened to the call of her offspring without removing her eyes from Marcel's face. But at length, maternal instinct temporarily conquered the desire to watch by the stricken man. Her unweaned puppies depended on her for life and for the moment mother love prevailed. With a final caress of the limp hand of Marcel, reluctantly, with head down and tail dragging, she followed Julie to the stockade.

CHAPTER XXXII

FROM THE FAR FRONTIERS

For days Marcel's youth and strength battled with the fever aggravated by infection in the deep wound. All that Gillies and Père Breton could do for the stricken man was done, but barring the simple remedies which stock the medicine chest of a post in the far north and the most limited knowledge of surgery possessed by the factors, the recovery of a patient depends wholly upon his vitality and constitution. With medical aid beyond reach, men die or fight back to health through the toughness of their fiber alone.

There was a time when Jean Marcel journeyed far toward the dim hills of a land from which there is no trail home for the feet of the *voyageur.* There were nights when Julie Breton sat with her brother and Jules, or McCain, stark fear in their hearts that the sun would never again lift above the Whale River hills for Jean Marcel, never again his daring paddle flash in sunlit white-water, or his snowshoes etch their webbed trail on the white floor of the silent places.

And during these days the impatient Wallace chafed with longing for the society of Julie whose pity for the sick man had made of her an indefatigable nurse. A few words in the morning and an hour or two at night was all the time she allotted the man to whom she had given her heart.

To the demand of the Inspector in the presence of Père Breton that Julie should substitute a Cree woman as nurse, she had replied:

"He has no one but us. His people are dead. He has been like a brother to me. I can do no less than care for him, poor boy!"

"Yes," added Père Breton, "he is as my son. Julie is right," and added, with a smile, "you two will have much time in the future to see each other."

So Wallace had been forced to make the best of it.

By the time that the steamer, *Inenew,* from Charlton Island, appeared with the English mail, and the supplies and trade-goods for the coming year, Jean Marcel had fought his way back from the frontiers of death. So relieved seemed the girl, who had given lavishly of her young strength, that she allowed Mrs. Gillies to take her place in the sick room while she spent with Wallace the last days of his stay at Whale River.

Once more the post people saw the lovers constantly together and more than one head shook sadly at the thought of the one who had lost, lying hurt, in heart and body, on a cot at the Mission, while another took his place beside Julie Breton.

At last, the steamer sailed for Fort George and no one in the group gathered at the landing doubted that the heart of Julie Breton went with it when they saw the light in her dark eyes as she bade the handsome Wallace good-bye.

It was an open secret now, communicated by Wallace to the factor, that he was to become a Catholic that autumn, and in June take Julie Breton as a bride away to East Main.

* * * * * * *

During the tense days when the fever heightened and the life of Jean Marcel hung on the turn of a leaf, there had been no repetition of the visit of Fleur to the sick room. But so loudly did she wail her complaint at her enforced absence from the man battling for his life, so near in the Mission house, that it was necessary to confine her with her puppies at a distance.

Once again conscious of his surroundings and rapidly gaining strength, Marcel insisted on seeing his dog. So, daily, under watchful guard, Fleur was taken into the room, often with a clumsy puppy, round and fluffy, who alternately nibbled with needle-pointed milk-teeth at Jean's extended hand, making a great to-do of snarling in mock anger, or rolled squealing on its back on the floor, while Fleur sprawled contentedly by the cot, tail beating the floor, love in her slant eyes for the master who now had found his voice, whose face once more shone with the old smile, which was her life.

CHAPTER XXXIII

RENUNCIATION

AUGUST drew to a close. The post clearing and the beach at Whale River were again bare of tepee and lodge of the hunters of fur who had repaired to their summer camps where fish were plentiful, to wait for the great flights of snowy geese that the first frosts would drive south from Arctic Islands. Daily the vitality and youth of Marcel were giving him back his strength, and no remonstrance of the Bretons availed to keep him quiet once his legs had mastered the distance to the trade-house. Except for a slight pallor in the lean face and the loss of weight, due to confinement, to his friends he was once more the Jean Marcel they had known, but for weeks, a sudden twisting of his firm mouth marking a twinge in the back, recalled only too vividly to them all the knife-thrust of Lelac.

When, rid of the fever, and again conscious, Jean had become strong enough to talk, he repeatedly voiced his gratitude to Julie for her loyalty as nurse, but she invariably covered his mouth with her hand refusing to hear him. Grown stronger and sitting up, he had often repeated his thanks, raising his face to hers with a twinkle in his dark eyes, in the hope that her manner of suppressing him might be continued; but she had tantalizingly refused to humor the convalescent.

"I shall close your mouth no longer, Monsieur," she had said with a grimace. "You will soon be the big, strong Jean Marcel we have always known and must not expect to be a helpless baby forever. And now that you can use your right arm, I shall no longer cut up your fish."

"But it is with great pain that I move my arm, Julie," he had protested in a feeble effort to enlist her sympathy and so prolong the personal ministrations he craved.

"Bah! When before has the great Jean Marcel feared pain? It is only a ruse, Monsieur. I am too busy, now that you can help yourself, to treat you as a child."

And so, reluctantly, Marcel had resigned himself to doing without the aid of the nimble fingers of Julie Breton. The fierce bitterness in his heart, which, before the fight on the beach with the Lelacs had made of the days an endless torment, gave place, on his recovery, to a state of mind more sane. Deep and lasting as was his wound, the realization of the girl's devoted care of him had, during his convalescence, numbed the old rawness. Gratitude and his innate manhood shamed Marcel into a suppression of his grief and the showing of a brave face to Julie Breton and the little world of Whale River. In his extremity she had stood staunchly by his side. She had been his friend, indeed. He deserved no more. And now in his prayers, for he was a devout believer in the teachings of Père Breton, he asked for her happiness.

One evening found three friends, Julie, Jean Marcel and Fleur, again walking on the shore of the Great Whale in the mellow sunset. Romping with puppy awkwardness, Fleur's progeny roved near them. The hush of an August night was upon the land. Below, the young ebb ran silently without ripple. Not a leaf stirred in the scrub edging the trail. The dead sun, master artist, had limned the heavens with all the varied magic of his palette, and the gray bay, often sullenly restless under low-banked clouds, or blanketed with mist, now reached out, a shimmering floor, to the rim of the world.

In silence the two, mute with the peace of the moment, watched the heightening splendor of the western skies. Disdaining the alluring scents of the neighboring scrub, which her puppies were exploring, Fleur kept to Marcel's side where her nose might find his hand, for she had not forgotten the days of their recent separation.

"What you did for me I can never repay."

Marcel broke the silence, his eyes on the White Bear Hills, sapphire blue on southern horizon.

The girl turned impatiently.

"Monsieur Jean Marcel, what I have done, I would do for any friend. I am weary of hearing you speak of it. Have you no eyes for the sunset the good God has given us? Let us speak of that."

He smiled as one smiles at a child.

"*Bien!* We shall speak no more of it then, Ma'm'selle Breton. But this you shall hear. I am sorry that I acted like a boy about M'sieu Wallace. You will forgive me?"

"There is nothing to forgive," she answered. "I know you were hurt. It was natural for you to feel the way you did."

"But I showed little of the man, Julie. I was hurt here," and he placed his hand on his heart, "and I was a child."

She smiled wistfully, slowly shaking her head. "I fear you were very like a man, Jean. But you are going away and I may not be here in the spring—may not see you for a long time—so I want to tell you now how proud I have been of you this summer."

He looked up quizzically.

"Yes, you have made a great name on the East Coast this summer, Jean Marcel. When you were ill the Crees talked of little else—of your travelling where no Indian had dared to go until you found the caribou; your winning, over those terrible Lelacs and proving your innocence; your fighting them with bare hands, because you knew no fear."

The face of Marcel reddened as the girl continued.

"You are brave and you have a great heart and a wise head, Jean Marcel; some day you will be a factor of the Company. Wherever I may be, I shall think of you and always be proud that you are my friend."

Inarticulate, numb with the torture of hopeless love, Marcel listened to Julie Breton's farewell.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE VOICE OF THE WINDIGO

WHEN the first flight of snowy geese, southward bound, flashed in an undulating white cloud over Whale River, the canoe of Jean Marcel was loaded with supplies for a winter in the land of the Windigo. And in memory of Antoine Beaulieu, he was taking with him as comrade and partner the eighteen-year-old cousin of the dead man whose kinsmen had humbly made their amends for their stand against Marcel before the hearing. Young Michel Beaulieu, of stouter fibre than Antoine, had at length overcome his scruples against entering the land of dread, through his admiration for Marcel's daring and his confidence in the man whose reputation since the hearing and the fight with the Lelacs had been now firmly established with the Whale River Crees. When Marcel had repeatedly assured the boy that he had neither seen the trail of *Matchi Manito,* the devil, nor once heard the wailing of a giant Windigo through all the long snows of the past winter in the Salmon country, Michel's pride at the offer had finally conquered his fears. So leaving the puppy he had given Julie as the nucleus for a Mission dog-team, and presenting Gillies with another, Marcel packed the three remaining children of Fleur whom he had named in honor of his three staunch friends, Colin, Jules and Angus, into the canoe already deep with supplies, and gripping the hands of those who had assembled on the beach, eased the craft into the flood-tide.

"Good-bye and good luck, Jean!" called Gillies.

"De rabbit weel be few; net beeg cache of feesh before de freeze-up!" urged the practical Jules.

"No fear, Jules. We ketch all de feesh en de lac," laughed Jean. Then his eyes sought Julie Breton's sober face as he said in French:

"I will not come back for Christmas, Julie. The pups will not be old enough for the trail."

With the conviction that he was saying good-bye to Julie Breton forever—that on his return in June, she would be far in the south with Wallace, he pushed off as she called, *"Bon voyage, Jean! Dieu vous benisse!"* (God bless you!)

When the paddles of Jean and Michel drove the boat into the stream, the whining Fleur, beholding her world moving away from her, plunged into the river after the *voyageurs*.

"Go back, Fleur!" ordered Jean sternly. "You travel de shore; de cano' ees too full wid de pup." So the protesting Fleur turned back to follow the shore. The puppies, yet too young and clumsy to keep abreast of the tide-driven canoe, on the broken beach of the river, had to be freighted.

When the boat was well out in the flood, Marcel waved his cap with a last "A'voir!"

Far up-stream, a half-hour later, rhythmic flashes, growing swiftly fainter and fainter, until they faded from sight, marked for many a long moon the last of Jean Marcel.

* * * * * * *

September waned, and the laggard rear-guard of the brant and Hutchins geese, riding the first stinging northers, passed south in the wake of the wavies. On the heels of September followed a week of mellow October days lulling the north into temporary forgetfulness of the menace of the bitter months to come. Then the unleashed winds from the Arctic freighted with the first of the long snows beat down the coast and river valleys, locking the land with ice. But far in the Windigo-haunted hills of the forbidden land of the Crees a man and a boy, snug in snow-banked tepee, laughed as the winds whined through November nights and the snow made deep in the timber, for their cache was heaped high with frozen trout, whitefish and caribou.

With the coming of the snow, the puppies, young as they were, soon learned that the life of a husky was not all mad pursuit of rabbit or wood-mouse and stalking of ptarmigan; not all rioting through the "bush," on the trail of some mysterious four-footed forest denizen; not alone the gulping of a supper of toothsome whitefish or trout, followed by a long nap curled in a cosy hole in the snow, gray noses thrust into bushy tails. Although their wolf-blood made them, at first, less amenable than the average husky puppy to the discipline of collar and traces, their great mother, through the force of her example as lead-dog and the swift punishment she meted out to any culprit, contributed as much as Jean's own efforts to the breaking of the puppies to harness.

Jules, the largest, marked like his mother with slate-gray patches on head and back was all dog; but the rogues, Colin and Angus, mottled with the lighter gray of their sire, and with his rangier build, inherited much of his wolf nature. Many a whipping from the long lash of plaited caribou hide, many a sharp nip from Fleur's white teeth, were required to teach the young wolves the manners of camp and trail; to bend their wild wills to the habit of instant obedience to the voice of Jean Marcel. But Fleur was a conscientious mother and under her stern tutelage and the firm but kind treatment of Jean,—who loved to rough and wrestle the puppies in the dry snow, rolling them on their backs and holding them helpless in the grip of his sinewy hands—as the shaggy ruffians grew in the wisdom of trace and trail, so in their wild natures ripened love for the master who fed and romped with them, meting out punishment to him alone who had sinned.

In search of black and silver foxes, whose pelts, worth in the world of cities their weight in gold, are the chief inspiration of the red hunter's dreams, Jean had run his new trap-lines far in the valleys of the Salmon watershed. But to the increasing satisfaction of the still worried Michel, the sole noises of the night which had yet met his fearful ears, had been the scream of lynx, the occasional caterwauling of wolverine and the hunting chorus of timber wolves. But darkness still held potential terror for the lad in whom, at his mother's knee, had been instilled dread of the demon-infested bad-lands north of the Ghost, and he never camped alone.

January came with its withering winds, burning and cracking the faces of the hunters following their trap-lines; swirling with fine snow, which struck like shot, and stung like the lash of whips. Often when facing the drive of a blizzard even the hardy Fleur, wrinkling her nose with pain, would stop and turn her back on the needle-pointed barrage. At times when the fierce cold, freezing all moisture from the atmosphere, filled the air with powdery crystals of ice, the true sun, flanked by sun-dogs in a ringed halo, lifted above the shimmering barrens, dazzlingly bright.

One night when Jean and Michel, camped in the timber at the end of the farthest line of fox traps, had turned into their robes before a hot fire, in front of which in a snow hole they had stretched a shed tent both as windbreak and heat-reflector, a low wail, more sob than cry of night prowler, drifted up the valley.

" You hear dat? " whispered Michel.

The hairy throat of Fleur, burrowed in the snow close to the tent, rumbled like distant thunder.

Marcel, already fast drifting into sleep, muttered crossly:

" Eet ees de Windigo come to eat you, Michel."

Again upon the hushed valley under star-encrusted heavens where the borealis flickered and pulsed and streamed in fantastic traceries of fire, broke a wailing sob.

With a cry Michel sat up turning a face gray with fear to the man beside him. Again Fleur growled, her lifted nose sniffing the freezing air, to send her awakened puppies into a chorus of snarls and yelps.

Raised on an elbow, Marcel sleepily asked:

" What de trouble, Michel? You and Fleur hear de Windigo? "

"Listen!" insisted the boy. "I nevaire hear dat soun' before."

Silencing the dog, Jean pushed back his hood to free his ears, smiling into the blanched face of the wild-eyed boy beside him.

Shortly the noiseless night was marred by a sobbing moan, as if some stricken creature writhed under the torture of mangled flesh.

Marcel knew that neither wolf, lynx, nor wolverine—the "Injun-devil" of the superstitious—was responsible for the sound. What could it be? he queried. No furred prowler of the night, and he knew the varied voices of them all, had such a muffled cry. Puzzled and curious he left his rabbit-skin robes and stood with the terrified Michel beside the fire. In an uproar, the dogs ran into the "bush" with manes bristling and bared fangs, to hurl the husky challenge down the valley at the invisible menace.

"Eet ees de Windigo! Dey tell me at Whale Riviere not to come een dees countree! De Windigo an' Matchi Manito ees loose here," whimpered Michel through chattering teeth.

Jean Marcel did not know what it was that made night horrible with its moaning but he intended to learn at once. The lungs behind that noise could be pierced by rifle bullet and the cold steel of his knife. There was not a creature in the north with which Fleur would not readily battle. He would soon learn if the hide of a Windigo was tough enough to turn the knife-like fangs of Fleur, and the bullets of his 30-30.

Seizing Michel by the shoulders he shook the boy roughly.

"I tell you, Michel, de devil dat mak' dat soun' travel on four feet. You tie up de pup an' wait here. Fleur an' I go an' breeng back hees skin."

But the panic-stricken Michel would not be left alone, and when he had fastened the excited puppies, with shaking hands he drew his rifle from its skin case and joined Marcel.

Holding with difficulty on her rawhide leash the aroused Fleur leaping ahead in the soft footing, Marcel snow-shoed through the timber in the direction from which the sound had come.

After travelling some time they stopped to listen.

From somewhere ahead, seemingly but a few hundred yards down the valley, floated the eerie sobbing. Michel's gun slipped to the snow from his palsied hands,

Turning Jean gripped the boy's arm.

"Why you come? You no good to shoot. De Windigo eat you w'ile you hunt for your gun."

Picking up the rifle, the boy threw off the mittens fastened to his sleeve by thongs, and gritting his teeth, followed Marcel and Fleur.

Shortly they stopped again to listen. Straight ahead through the spruce the moaning rose and fell. Fleur, frantic to reach the mysterious enemy, plunged forward dragging Marcel, followed by the quaking boy who held his cocked rifle in readiness for the rush of beast or devil. Passing through scrub, a small clearing opened up before them. Checking Fleur, Marcel peered through the dim light of the forest into the opening lit by the stars, when the clearing echoed with the uncanny sound.

Marcel's keen eyes strained across the starlit snow into the murk beyond, as Michel gasped in his ears:

"By Gar! I see noding dere! Eet ees de Windigo for sure!"

But the Frenchman was staring fixedly at a clump of spruce on the opposite edge of the opening. As the unearthly sobbing rose again into the night, he loosed the maddened dog and followed.

They were close to the spruce, when a great gray shape suddenly rose from the snow directly in their path. For an instant a pair of pale wings flapped wildly in their faces. Then a squawk of terror was smothered as the fangs of Fleur struck at the feathered shape of a huge snowy owl. A wrench of the dog's powerful neck, and the ghostly hunter of the northern nights had made his last patrol, victim of his own curiosity.

With a loud laugh Jean turned to the dazed Michel:

"Tak' good look at de Windigo, Michel. My fox trap hold heem fas' w'ile he seeng to de star."

The amazed Michel stared at the white demon in the fox trap with open mouth. "I t'ink—dat h'owl —de Windigo for sure," he stuttered.

"I nevaire hear de h'owl cry dat way myself, Michel, but I know dat Fleur and my gun mak' any Windigo een dees countree look whiter dan dat bird. W'en we come near dees place I expect somet'ing een dat fox trap."

And strangely, through the remaining moons of the long snows, the sleep of the lad was not again disturbed by the wailing of Windigos seeking to devour a young half-breed Cree by the name of Michel Beaulieu.

CHAPTER XXXV

RAW WOUNDS

JUNE once again found Marcel paddling into Whale River. The sight of the high-roofed Mission, where, in the past, he had known so much of joy and pain, quickened his stroke. He wondered whether she had gone away with Wallace at Christmas, or whether there would be a wedding when the trade was over and the steamer would take them to East Main. Avoiding the Mission until he had learned from Jules what he so longed to know, Marcel went up to the trade-house where he found Gillies and McCain. Too proud to speak of what was nearest his heart, he told his friends of his winter in the Salmon country. It had paid him well, his long portage from the Ghost, the previous September, to the untrapped valleys to the north. When, unlashing his fur-pack, he tossed on the counter three glossy black-fox pelts and six skins of soft silver-gray, alone worth well over a thousand dollars, even at the low prices of the far north, the eyes of Gillies and Angus McCain bulged in amazement. Cross fox, shading from the black of the back and shoulder to rich mahogany, followed; dark sheeny marten—the Hudson's Bay sable of commerce—and thick gray pelts of the fisher. Otter, lynx and mink made up the balance of the fur.

"Great Scott! the Salmon headwaters must be alive with fur!" exclaimed Gillies examining the skins, "and most of them are prime."

"Dere ees much fur een dat country," laughed Jean, "eef de Windigo don' ketch you, eh, Michel?"

Michel, proud of his part in so successful a winter and in having bearded the demons of the Salmon in their dens and lived to tell the tale, blushed at the memory of the snowy owl.

"This is the largest catch of fur traded in my time at Whale River, Jean," said Gillies. "What are you going to do with all your credit? You can't use it on yourself; you'll have to get married and build a shack here."

Blood darkened the bronzed face, but Marcel made no reply.

He had indeed wrung a handsome toll from the haunted hills, which, tabooed by Cree trappers for generations, were tracked by the padded feet of countless fur-bearers. After allowing Michel a generous interest in the fur, Marcel found that he had increased his credit at the post by over two thousand dollars, giving him in all a trade credit of twenty-six hundred dollars with the Company. He could in truth afford to marry and build a shack if he were made a Company servant, but the girl —— Then he heard Gillies' voice.

"Jean, I want you and Angus to go up to the Komaluk Islands with a York boat. The whalers are getting the Husky trade which we ought to have. They will ruin them with whiskey."

"Ver' well, M'sieu!"

Marcel drew a breath of relief. If she were not already married, he would be only too glad to go north—to be spared seeing Julie Breton made the wife of Wallace. Then, at last, Jules appeared.

After the customary hug, Jean drew the big head man outside, demanding in French:

"Is she here still? They were not married at Christmas? When do they marry?"

Jules shook his head. "A letter came by the Christmas mail. By the Company he was ordered at once to Winnipeg. He is there now and will not come this summer."

"And Julie, is she well?"

"Yes."

"When, then, will they marry?"

Jules shrugged his great shoulders. "Christmas maybe, perhaps next June. No one knows."

Marcel was strangely elated at the news. Julie was not yet out of his life. She would be at Whale River on his return from the north. Even if he were held all summer she would be there as of old.

The welcome of Julie and Père Breton at the Mission temporarily drove from Marcel's thoughts the coming separation. Far into the night the three friends talked while Julie's skillful fingers were busy with her trousseau. She spoke of the postponement of her wedding, due to the presence of Inspector Wallace at the headquarters of the Company at Winnipeg. Julie's olive skin flushed with her pride, as she said that he had been mentioned already as the next Chief Inspector. Wallace had already become a Catholic, but the uncertainty of the time of his return to the East Coast might cause the delay of the ceremony until the following June.

Marcel's hungry eyes did not leave the girl's face as she talked of her future—the future he had dreamed of sharing. But the wound was still raw and he was glad to escape the acute suffering which her nearness caused, by leaving Fleur and her puppies in Julie's care, and starting with McCain the following morning, in a York boat loaded with trade-goods, for the north coast.

In August the York boat returned from the

Komaluk Islands and Jean drew his supplies for another winter on Big Salmon waters. To Gillies, who urged him to accept a regular berth and put his team of half-breed wolves on the mail-route to Rupert, for the winter previous the scarcity of good dogs along the coast had been the cause of the Christmas mail not reaching Whale River until the second of January, Marcel turned a deaf ear. In another year, he said, he would carry the mail up the coast, but his puppies were still too young to be pushed hard through a blizzard. Another year and he would show the posts down the coast what a real dog-team could do.

Glancing at McCain, Gillies shook his head resignedly, for he knew well why Jean Marcel wished to avoid Whale River.

On the morning of his departure, as Jean stood with Michel on the beach by the canoe, surrounded by his four impatient dogs, Julie stooped and kissed the white marking between Fleur's ears, whispering a good-bye. Turning her head in response, the dog's moist nose and rough tongue reached the girl's hand.

" Lucky Fleur! " Jean said to his friends.

" It's sure worth while being a dog, sometimes," drawled Angus McCain with a grimace. But Julie Breton ignored the remarks, wishing Marcel Godspeed.

Through the day as they travelled Marcel looked on the high shores of the Salmon with unseeing eyes, for in them was the vision of a girl bending over a great dog.

CHAPTER XXXVI

DREAMS

CHRISTMAS was but a week distant. For the first time in years Jean Marcel possessed a dog-team, and through the long December nights he had come to a decision to talk to Julie Breton once more, as in the old days, before she left Whale River forever.

Led by Fleur, Colin, Angus and Jules, now grown to huge huskies, already abreast of their mother in height and bulk of bone, and showing the wolf strain in their rangy gait and in red lower-lids of their amber eyes, were jingling down the river trail to the festivities at the post. For, from Fort Chimo, west across the wide north, to Rampart House, Christmas and New Years are kept. From far and wide come dog-teams of the red hunters down the frozen river trails for the feasting and merrymaking at the fur-posts. Two weeks, "fourteen sleeps" on the trail, going and coming, is not held by many a hardy hunter and his family too high a price to pay for a few short days of trading and gossip and dancing. There are many who trap too far from the posts and in country too inaccessible to make the journey possible, but throughout the white desolation of the fur lands the spirit of Christmas is strong and yearly the frozen valleys echo to the tinkling of the bells of dog-teams and the laughter of the children of the snows.

Over the beaten river trail, ice-hardened by the passage of many sleds preceding them, romped Fleur and her sons, toying with the weight of the two men and the food bags on the sled. At times, Jean and Michel ran behind the team to stretch their legs and start their chilled blood, for it was forty below zero. But to the dogs, travelling without wind at forty below on a beaten trail, was sheer delight. Often, on the high barrens of the Salmon they had slept soundly in their snow holes at minus sixty.

As Jean watched his great lead-dog, her thick coat of slate-gray and white glossy with superb vitality, set a pace for her rangy sons which sent the white miles sliding swiftly past, his heart sang.

Good all day for a thousand pounds, they were, on a broken trail, and since November he had in vain sought the limit of their staying power. Not yet the equals of their mother in pulling strength, at eighteen months their wolf-blood had already given the puppies her stamina. What a team to bring the Christmas mails up the coast from East Main! he thought, idly whirling the whip of plaited caribou hide which had never flecked the ears of Fleur, but which he sometimes needed when the excitable Colin or Angus scented game and, puppy-like, started to bolt. No dogs on the coast could take the trail from these sons of Fleur. No dog-team he had ever seen could break-out and trot away with a thousand pounds. That winter they had done it with a load of caribou meat on the barrens. Yes, next year he would accept Gillies' offer and put Fleur and her sons on the winter-mail—Fleur, and the team she had given him; his Fleur, whom he had followed and fought for: who had in turn battled for his life.

"Marche, Fleur!" he called, his eyes bright with his thoughts.

The lead-dog leaped from a swinging trot into a long lope, straightening the traces, followed by the team keen for a run. Away they raced in the good going of the hard trail. Then in early afternoon when the sun hung low in the dim west, the men turned into the thick timber of the shores, where, sheltered from the wind, they shovelled out a camp ground with their snow-shoes and built a roaring fire while the puppies, ravenous for their supper, yelped and fretted until Jean threw them the frozen fish which they caught in the air and bolted.

Before Jean and Michel had boiled their tea and caribou stew, four shaggy shapes with noses in tails were asleep in the snow, indifferent to the sting of the strengthening cold which made the spruces around them snap, and split the river ice with the boom of cannon.

Wrapped in his fur robe before the fire, Marcel lay wondering if he should find Julie Breton still at Whale River.

Hours later, waking with a groan, Marcel sat upright in his blankets. Near him the tired Michel snored peacefully. Throwing a circle of light on the surrounding spruce, huge embers of the fire still burned. The moon was dead, a veil of haze masking the dim stars. It was bitter cold. Half out of his covering, the startled *voyageur* shivered, but it was not from the bite of the air. It was the stark poignancy of the dream from which he had escaped, that left him cold.

He had stood by the big chute of the Conjuror's Falls on the Ghost, known as the "Chute of Death," and as he gazed into the boiling maelstrom of white-water, the blanched face of Julie Breton had looked up at him, her lips moving in hopeless appeal, as she was swept from sight.

Into the roaring flume he had plunged headlong, frenziedly seeking her, as he vainly fought down through the gorge, buffeted and mauled by the churning water, but though he hunted the length of the river below, never found her.

Again, he was travelling with Fleur and the team in a blizzard, when out of the smother of snow before him beckoned the wraith of Julie Breton—always just ahead, always beckoning to him. Pushing his dogs to their utmost he never drew nearer, never reached the wistful face he loved, luring him through the curtain of snow.

Marcel freshened the fire and lighted his pipe. It was long before he threw off the grip of his dreams and slept.

CHAPTER XXXVII

FOR LOVE OF A GIRL

Two days before Christmas the team of Jean Marcel, its harness brave with colored worsted, meeting the snarls of hostile Cree curs with the like threat of white fangs, jingled gaily past sleep-house and tepees, and drew up before the log trade-house at Whale River. Returning the greeting of the Crees who hailed him, he threw open the slab-door of the building.

"Bon jour, Jean, eet ees well dees Chreesmas you come." The grave face of Jules Duroc checked the jest on Marcel's lips as he shook his friend's hand.

"You are sad, mon ami; what has happened to the merry Jules?" Jean asked.

"Ah, Jean Marcel! Dere ees bad news for you at Whale River."

Across Marcel's brain flashed the memory of his dreams. Julie! Something had happened to Julie Breton. His speeding heart shook him as an engine a boat. A vise on his throat smothered the questions he strove to ask. His lips twitched, but from them came no words, as his questioning eyes held those of Jules.

"Yes, eet ees as you t'ink, Jean Marcel. She ees ver' seek."

Marcel's hands closed on Jules' arms as he demanded hoarsely:

"Mon Dieu! W'at ees eet, Jules? Tell me, w'at ees eet?"

"She has de bad arm. Cut de han' wid a knife."

Blood-poisoning, because of his medical ignorance, held less terror for Marcel than some strange fever, insidious and mysterious. He had feared that Julie Breton had a dread disease against which the crude skill of the north is helpless. So, as he hastened to the Mission where he found Mrs. Gillies installed as nurse, his hopes rose, for a wound in the hand could not be fatal.

From the anxious-eyed Père Breton who met him at the door, Jean learned the story.

Ten days before, Julie had cut her hand with a knife while preparing frozen fish for cooking. For days she had ignored the wound, when the hand, suddenly reddening, began to swell, causing much pain. Gillies and her brother had opened the inflamed wound, cleansing it with bichloride, but in spite of their efforts, the swelling had increased, advancing to the elbow.

She was now running a high fever, suffering great pain and frequently delirious. They realized that the proper treatment was an opening of the lymphatic glands of forearm and elbow to reach the poison slowly working upward, but did not dare attempt it. The priest told Marcel that in such cases if the poison was not absorbed into the circulation or reached by operation, it would extend to the arm-pit, then to the neck, with fatal termination.

Jean Marcel listened with head in hands to the despairing brother. Then he asked:

"Is there at Fort George or East Main, no one who could help her?"

"At Fort George, Monsieur Hunter who has been lately ordered there to the Protestant church, is a medical missionary. We learned this to-day when the Christmas mail arrived. But they were five days coming from Fort George with their poor dogs. It will take you eight days to make the round trip and even in a week it may be too late—too late ——" He finished with a groan.

"Father, I will go and bring this missionary. I shall return before a week."

"God speed you, my son! The mail team is worn out and we were sending a team of the Crees, but they have no dogs like yours."

Mrs. Gillies led Marcel into Julie Breton's room and left them. On her white bed, with wayward masses of dusky hair tumbled on her pillow, lay Julie Breton, moaning low in the delirium of high fever. On a pillow at her side lay her bandaged left arm. As Marcel looked long at the flushed face with its parted lips murmuring incoherently, the muscles of his jaw flexed through the frost-blackened skin as he clenched his teeth at his helplessness to aid her—this stricken girl for whom he would have given his life.

Then he knelt, and lifting the limp hand on the coverlet, pressed it long to his lips, rose, and went out.

When Mrs. Gillies returned she found the right hand of Julie Breton wet—and understood.

First feeding and loosing his dogs in the stockade Marcel hurried to the trade-house. There he obtained from Jules five days' rations of whitefish for the dogs, and some pemmican, hard bread and tea.

"You t'ink you can mak' For' George een t'ree day?" Jules shook his head doubtfully. "Eet nevaire been made een t'ree day, Jean."

"No one evair before on de East Coast travel as I travel, Jules," was the low reply.

Gillies, Père Breton and McCain, talking earnestly, entered the room to overhear Marcel's words.

"Welcome back, Jean; you are going to Fort

George instead of Baptiste?" the factor asked, shaking Marcel's hand.

"Yes, M'sieu, my team ees stronger team dan Baptiste's."

"When do you start?"

"Een leetle tam; I jus' feed my dogs."

"Are they in good shape? They must be tired from the river trail."

"Dey will fly, M'sieu."

"Thank heaven for that, lad. We've got just one good dog left in the mail team—the one you gave me. The rest are scrubs and they came in to-day dead beat. Two of our Ungavas died in November."

"M'sieu," said Marcel quietly, "my dogs will make For' George een t'ree days."

"It's never been done, Jean, but I hope you will."

When Marcel brought his refreshed dogs to the trade-house an hour later for his rations, a silent group of men awaited him. As Fleur trotted up, ears pricked, mystified at being routed out and harnessed in the dark, after she had eaten and curled up for the night, they were eagerly inspected by the factor.

"Why, the pups have grown inches since you left here in August, Jean. They're almost as big as Fleur, now," said Gillies, throwing the light from his lantern on the team.

"Tiens! Dat two rear dog look lak' timber wolves," cried Jules, as Colin and Angus turned their red-lidded, amber eyes lazily toward him, opening cavernous mouths in wide yawns, for they were still sleepy. Fleur, alive to the subdued tones of Jean Marcel and sensing something unusual, muzzled her master's hand for answer.

"What a team! What a team!" exclaimed McCain. "Never have the Huskies brought four such dogs here. They ought to walk away with a thousand pounds. Are they fast, Jean?"

"Dey can take a thousand all day, M'sieu. W'en you see me again, you will know how fast dey are. A'voir!" Marcel gripped the hands of the others, then turned to Père Breton, the muscles of his dark face working with suffering.

"Father," he said, "if she should wake and can understand, tell her—tell her to wait—a little longer till Jean and Fleur return. If—if she—cannot wait for us—tell her that Fleur and Jean Marcel will follow her—out to the sunset."

Then he turned, cracked his whip, hoarsely shouted: "Marche, Fleur!" and disappeared with his dogs into the night.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE WHITE TRAIL TO FORT GEORGE

One hundred and fifty miles down the wind-harassed East Coast, was a man who could save Julie Breton. The mind of Marcel held one thought only as his hurrying dogs loped down the river trail to the Bay. Dark though it was, for the stars were veiled, Fleur never faltered, keeping the trail by instinct and the feel of her feet.

Reaching the Bay the trail swung south skirting the beach, often cutting inland to avoid circling long points and shoulders of shore; at the Cape of the Winds—the midwinter vortex of unleashed Arctic blasts—making a deep cut to the sheltered valley of the Little Salmon. Marcel was too dog-wise to push his huskies as they swung south on the sea-ice, for no sled-dogs work well after eating.

As the late moon slowly lifted, he shook his head, for it was a moon of snow. If only the weather held until he could bring his man from Fort George, but fate was against him. That he could average fifty miles a day going and coming, with the light sled, he was confident. He knew what hearts beat in those shaggy breasts in front—what stamina he had never put to the supreme test, lay in their massive frames. He knew that Fleur would set her sons a pace, at the call of Jean Marcel, that would eat the frozen miles to Fort George, as they had never before slid past a dog-runner. But once a December norther struck down upon them on their return, burying the trail in drift, with its shot-like drive in the teeth of man and dogs, it would kill their speed, as a cliff stops wind.

He had intended to camp for a few hours, later in the night, to rest his dogs, but the warning of the ringed moon flicked him with fear, as a whiplash stings a lagging husky. It meant in December, snow and wind. He must race that wind to the lee of Big Island, so he pushed on through the night over the frozen shell of the Bay, stopping only once to boil tea and rest his over-willing dogs.

As day broke blue and bitter in the ashen east, a team of spent huskies with ice-hung lips and flews swung in from the trail skirting the lee shore of Big Island and the driver in belted caribou capote, a rim of ice from his frozen breath circling his lean face, made a fire from cedar kindlings brought on the sled, boiled tea and pemmican, and feeding his dogs, lay down in his robes. In twelve hours of constant toil the dogs of Marcel had put Whale River sixty white miles behind.

At noon he shook off the sleep which weighted his limbs, forced himself from his blankets, ate and pushed on. Although the air smelled of snow, and in the north, brooding, low-banked clouds hugged the Bay, snow and wind still held off.

In early afternoon as the sun buried itself in the ice-fields, muffled rays lit the bald shoulders of the distant Cape of the Four Winds, seventy miles from his goal.

"Haw, Fleur!" he called, and the lead-dog swung inland, to the left, on the short-cut across the Cape.

As yet the tough Ungavas had shown no signs of lagging. With their superb vitality and staying power, they had travelled steadily through the night, after a half day on the river. Led by their tireless mother, each hour they had put five miles of snowy trail behind them. With the weather steady, Marcel had no doubt of when he would reach Whale River, for the weight of an extra man on the sled would be little felt on a hard trail and he would run much himself. But with the menace of snow and wind hanging over him, he travelled with a heavy heart.

On Christmas Eve, again a ringed moon rose as the dogs raced down an icy trail into the valley of the Little Salmon. The conviction that a December blizzard, long overdue, was making in the north to strike down upon him, paralyzing his speed, drove him on through the night. Reckless of himself, he was equally reckless of his dogs, led by the iron Fleur. It was well that her still growing sons had the blood of timber wolves in their veins, for Fleur, sensing the frenzy of Marcel to push on and on, responded with all her matchles stamina.

At last they camped at the Point of the Caribou and ate. To-morrow, he thought, would be Christmas. A Merry Christmas indeed for Jean Marcel. Then he slept. The next afternoon as they passed Wastikun, the Isle of Graves, the wind shifted to the northeast and the snow closed in on the dog-team nearing its goal. The blizzard had come, and Jean Marcel, knowing what miles of drifts; what toil breaking trail to give footing to his team in the soft snow; what days of battling the drive of the wind whipping their faces with needle-pointed fury, awaited their return, groaned aloud. For it meant, battle as he would, he might now reach Whale River too late; he might find that Julie Breton had not waited, but over weary, had gone out into the sunset.

In the early evening, forty-eight hours out of Whale River, four white wraiths of huskies with a ghost-like driver, turned in to the trade-house at Fort George. The spent dogs lay down, dropping their frosted masks in the snow, the froth from their mouths rimming their lips with ice.

Sheeted in white from hood to moccasins, the *voyageur* entered the trade-house in a swirl of snow and called for the factor. A bearded man engaged in conversation with another white man, behind the trade counter, rose at Jean's entrance.

"I am from Whale River, M'sieu. My name is Jean Marcel. Here ees a lettair from M'sieu Gillies." Marcel handed an oil-skin envelope to McKenzie, the factor, who surveyed with curiosity the ice-crusted stranger with haggard eyes who came to Fort George on Christmas night.

At the mention of Whale River, the man who had been in conversation with McKenzie behind the counter, also rose to his feet. And Marcel, who had not seen his face, now recognized him. It was Inspector Wallace.

"Too bad! Too bad!" muttered the factor, reading the note, "and we're in for a December blizzard."

"What is it, McKenzie?" demanded Wallace, coming from behind the counter and reaching for Gillies' note.

The narrowed eyes of Marcel watched the face of Wallace contract with pain as he read of the peril of the woman he loved.

"Tell me what you know, Marcel!" Wallace demanded brokenly.

Jean briefly explained Julie's desperate condition.

"When did you leave Whale River?"

"Two day ago."

"What," cried McKenzie, "you came through in two days from Whale River? Lord, man! I never heard of such travelling. Your dogs must be marvels!"

"I came in two day, M'sieu," repeated Marcel, "because she weel not leeve many day onless she have help."

"Why, man, I can't believe it. It's never been done. When did you sleep?" The factor called to a Company Indian who entered the room, "Albert, take care of his dogs and feed them."

"Dey are wild, M'sieu. I weel go wid heem."

Marcel started to go out with the Indian, for his huskies sorely needed attention, then stopped to stare in wonder at Wallace, who had slumped into a chair, head in hands. For a moment the hunter looked at the inert Inspector; then his lip curled, his frost-blackened face reflecting his scorn, as he said:

"W'ere ees dees missionary, M'sieu? We mus' start een a few hours, w'en my dogs have rest."

"What, start in the teeth of this? Listen to it!" The drumming of wind and shot-like snow on the trade-house windows steadily increased in fury.

The muscles of Marcel's face stiffened into stone as he grimly insisted:

"We mus' start to-night."

"You are crazy, man; you need sleep," protested McKenzie. "I know it's a life and death matter. But you wouldn't help that girl at Whale River by losing the trail to-night and freezing. I'll see Hunter at once, but I can't allow him to go to his death. If the blow eases by morning, he can start."

Again Marcel turned, waiting for Wallace, who nervously paced the floor, to speak. Then with a shrug he said:

"M'sieu Wallace weel wish to start to-night? I have de bes' lead-dog on dees coast. She weel not lose de trail."

"What do you mean—Monsieur Wallace?" blurted the factor. Wallace raised a face on which agony and indecision were plainly written. But it was Jean Marcel who answered, with all the scorn of his tortured heart.

"She ees de fiancée—of M'sieu Wallace."

"Oh, I—I didn't—understand!" stumbled the embarrassed McKenzie, reddening to his eyes. "But—I can't advise you to start to-night, Mr. Wallace."

The factor went to the door. As he lifted the heavy latch, in spite of his bulk the power of the wind hurled him backward. The door crashed against the log-wall, while the room was filled with driving snow.

"You see what it's like, Wallace! No dog-team would have a chance on this coast to-night—not a chance."

"Yes," agreed Wallace, avoiding Marcel's eyes. Then he went on, "You understand, McKenzie, I'm knocked clean off my feet by this news. But—we'll want to start, at least, by morning—sooner, if the dogs are rested—that is, of course, if it's possible."

Deliberately ignoring the man who had thus bared his soul, Marcel drew the factor to one side.

"Mon Dieu, M'sieu!" he pleaded in low tones. "She weel not leeve. Onless we start at once, we shall be too late. Tak' me to de doctor!"

The agonized face of the hunter softened McKenzie.

"Well, all right, if Hunter will go and Mr. Wallace insists, but it's madness. I'll go over to the Mission now and talk to the doctor."

When Jean had seen to the feeding of his tired dogs whom he left asleep in a shack, he hurried through the driving snow with the Company Indian to the Protestant Mission House, where he found McKenzie alone with the missionary.

As he entered the lighted room, the Reverend Hunter, a tall, athletic-looking man of thirty, welcomed him, bidding him remove his capote and moccasins and thaw out at the hot box-stove.

"Mr. McKenzie has shown me Gillies' message, Marcel. Now tell me all you know about the case," said the missionary.

Briefly Marcel described the condition of Julie Breton—Gillies' crude attempt at surgery; the advance toward the shoulder of the swelling and inflammation, with the increasing fever.

When he had finished he cried in desperation:

"M'sieu, I have at Whale River credit for t'ree t'ousand dollar. Eet ees all ——"

Hunter's lifted hand checked him.

"Marcel, first I am a preacher of the gospel; also, I am a doctor of medicine. I came into the north to minister to the bodies as well as to the souls of its people. Do not speak of money. This case demands that we start at once. Have you good dogs?"

The drawn face of Marcel lighted with gratitude.

Troubled and mystified by the attitude of Wallace, McKenzie broke in, "He's surely got the best dogs on this coast—made a record trip down. But, Mr. Hunter, I'll not agree to your starting in this hell outside. You must wait until daylight. The Inspector has decided that it would be impossible to keep the trail."

"I came here to aid those *in extremis*," replied the missionary. "I will take the risk to save this girl. It's a matter of days and we may be too late as it is."

"T'anks, M'sieu, her brother, Père Breton, weel not forget your kindness; and I—I weel nevaire forget." The eyes of Marcel glowed with gratitude.

"Then it's understood that you start at daylight, if the wind won't blow you off the ice. I'll see you then." And McKenzie, looking hard at Marcel and Hunter, went out.

When the factor had closed the door, Jean turned to Dr. Hunter.

"Thees man who marries her een June, ees afraid to go. Weel Mr. Hunter start wid me at midnight?"

The big missionary gripped Marcel's hand as he said with a smile, "I did not promise McKenzie I would not go. At midnight we start for Whale River."

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE HATE OF THE LONG SNOWS

IN the unwritten law of the north no one in peril shall ask for succor in vain. So universal is this creed, so general its acceptance and observance throughout the vast land of silence, that when word is brought in to settlement, fur-post, or lonely cabin, that help is needed, it is a matter of course that a relief party takes the trail, however long and hazardous. And so it was with John Hunter, clergyman, physician, and man. New to the north, he had come from England at the call for volunteers to shepherd the souls and bodies of the people of the solitudes, and without hesitation, he agreed to undertake a journey which the older heads at Fort George knew might well culminate in the discovery later, by a searching party, of two stiffened bodies buried beside a starved dog-team, somewhere in the drifts behind the Cape of the Four Winds.

Marcel and the dogs were in sore need of a few hours' rest for the grilling duel with snow and wind, before them, so, when he had eaten, Jean turned into a bed in the Mission.

At midnight Jean hitched his dogs and waked Hunter. Leaving Fort George asleep in the smother of snow, down to the river trail, into the white drive of the norther plunged the dog-team.

Giving the trail-wise Fleur her head in the black night, Jean, with Hunter, followed the sled carrying their food and robes. Turning from the swept river ice into the Bay, dogs and men met the full beat of the blasts with heads lowered to ease the hammering of the pin-pointed scourge whipping their faces. With the neighboring shore smothered in murk, Marcel, trusting to Fleur's instinct to keep the trail over the blurred white floor which only increased the blackness above, followed the sled he could barely see. Speed against the wind was impossible, and at all hazards he must keep the trail, for if they swung to the west on the sea-ice they were doomed to wander until they froze. He would push on and camp, until daylight, in the lee of the Isle of Graves. With the light they would begin to travel. Then on the open ice, where there was little drift, he would give Fleur and her pups the chance to prove their mettle, for there would be little rest. And beyond, at the rendezvous of the winds, they would have ten miles inland through the drifts. The unproven sons of Fleur would indeed need the stamina of wolves to take them through the days to come.

At last the trail, which the lead-dog had held solely by keeping her nose to the ice, ran in under the bold shore of Wastikun. There, after feeding the dogs, they burrowed into the snow in the lee of the cliffs wrapped in their fur robes. With the wind, the temperature had risen and men and dogs slept hard until dawn. Then, hot tea, bread and pemmican spurred the fighting heart of Marcel with hope. The wind had eased, but powdery snow still drove down blanketing the near shore.

Daylight found them on their way. Due to the wind there was as yet little drift on the trail over the Bay ice and the freshened dogs, with lowered heads, swung up the coast at a trot. All day with but short respite, men and dogs battled on against the norther. The mouth of the Little Salmon was the goal Marcel had set for himself—the river valley from which they would cut overland behind the gray cape, to the north coast. Forty miles away it lay—forty cruel miles of the torturing beat of shot-like snow on the faces of men and dogs; forty miles of endless pull and drag for the iron thews of Fleur and the whelps of the wolf. This was the mark which the now ruthless Frenchman, with but one thought, one vision, set for the shaggy beasts he loved.

Hunter, game though he was, at last was forced to ride on the sled, so fierce was their pace into the wind. Steadily the great beasts ate up the miles. At noon, floundering through drifts like the billows of a broken sea, with Marcel ahead breaking trail, they crossed Caribou Point, Hunter, refusing to burden the dogs, wallowing behind the sled. There they boiled tea, then pushed on to the mouth of the Roggan.

At Ominuk, night fell like a tent, and again a white wraith of a lead-dog, blinded by the fury she faced, kept the trail by instinct, backed loyally by her brood of ice-sheathed wolves, foot-sore, trail-worn, following with low noises her tireless feet.

The coast swung sharply. They were in the lee of the Cape. But a few miles farther and a long rest in the sheltered river valley awaited them. Marcel stopped his dogs and went to Fleur, lying on the trail, her hot breath freezing as it left her panting mouth. Kneeling on the snow beside her with his back to the drive, he examined each hairy paw for pad-cracks or balled snow between the toes, but the feet of the Ungava were iron; then he took in his hands her great head with its battered nose, blood-caked from the snow barrage she had faced all day. Rubbing the ice from her masked eyes, Jean placed his hooded face against his dog's; she turned her nose and her rough tongue touched his frost-blackened cheek.

"Fleur," he said, "we are doing it for Julie—

you and Jean Marcel. We mus' mak' de Salmon to-night. Some day we weel hav' de beeg sleep—you and Jean."

Again he stroked her massive head with his red, unmittened hand, then for an instant resting his face against the scarred nose, sprang to his feet. With a glance at the paws and a word for each of the whining puppies whose white tails switched in answer, Jean cracked his whip and shouted, "Marche!"

Late that night a huge fire burned in the timber of the sheltered mouth of the Little Salmon. Two men and a dog-team ate ravenously, then slept like the dead, while over them roared the norther, rocking the spruce and jack-pine in the river bottom, heaping the drifts high on the Whale River trail.

In three days of gruelling toil Marcel had got within ninety miles of his goal—within a day and a half of Whale River had the trail been ice hard. But now it would be days longer—how many he dared not guess.

Had the weather held for him, four days from the night of his starting would have seen him home; for on an iced trail, at his call, his great dogs would have run like wolves at the rallying cry of the pack. As he drew his stiffened legs from the rabbit-skins to freshen the fire at dawn, he bit his cracked lips until they bled, at the thought of what the blizzard had meant to Julie Breton, waiting, waiting for the dog-team creeping up the East Coast, hobbled and held back by head-wind and drift.

The dogs had won a long rest and Marcel did not start breaking trail inland until after daylight. With the sunrise the wind had increased and the heart-sick Marcel groaned at the strength-sapping floundering in breast-high drifts which faced his devoted dogs, when he needed them fresh for the race up the sea-ice of the coast beyond. Before he slept, he had weighed the toil of ten miles of drift-barred short-cut across the Cape, against doubling the headland on the ice, but he had decided that no men or dogs could face the maelstrom of wind and snow which churned around its bald buttresses; no strength could force its way—no endurance prevail, against it.

With Marcel in the lead as trail-breaker and the missionary, who took the punishment without murmur, like the man he was, following the sled, Fleur led her sons up to their Calvary in the hills.

As they left the valley and reached the open tundra above, they met the full force of the wind. For an instant men and dogs stopped dead in their tracks, then with heads down they hurled themselves into the white fury which had buried the trail beyond all following.

On pushed the desperate Frenchman in the direction of the north coast, followed by Fleur with her whitened nose at the tails of his snow-shoes. At times, when the force of the snow-swirls sucked their very breath, men and dogs threw themselves panting on the snow, until, with wind regained, they stumbled on. Often plunging to their collars in the new snow, the huskies travelled solely by leaps, until, stalled nose-deep, tangled in traces and held by the drag of the overturned sled, Marcel and the exhausted Hunter came to their rescue. Heart-breaking mile after mile of the country over which Marcel had sped two days before, they painfully put behind them.

At noon, the man who lived his creed crumpled in the snow. Wrapping him in robes, Marcel lashed him on the sled and went on, the vision of a dying girl on a white cot at Whale River ever in his eyes.

Through a break in the snow, before the light waned, Marcel made out, dim in the north, the silhouette of Big Island. He was over the divide and well on his way to the coast. With the night, the wind eased, though the snow held, and although he was off the trail, the new snow on the exposed north slope of the Cape was either wind-packed or swept from the frozen tundra, and again the exhausted dogs found good footing.

For some time the team had been working easily down hill, Marcel often forced to brake the toboggan with his feet. He knew he had worked to the west of the trail, and was swinging in a circle to regain it. Worried by the sting of the cold, which was growing increasingly bitter as the wind fell off, he stopped to rub the muffled, frost-cracked face and hands of his spent passenger, cheering him with the promise of a roaring fire. When he started the team, Colin, stiffened by the rest, limped badly, and Jules, who had bucked the deep snow all day like a veteran of the mail-teams, gamely following his herculean mother, hobbled along, head and tail down, with a wrenched shoulder. It was high time they found a camping place. With the falling wind they would freeze in the open. So he pushed on through the murk, seeking the beach where there was wood and a lee.

They were swiftly dropping down to the sea-ice but snow and darkness drew around them an impenetrable curtain. Seizing the gee-pole, Marcel had thrown his weight back on the sled to keep it off the dogs on a descent when suddenly Fleur, whose white back he could barely see moving in front, with a whine stopped dead in her tracks and flattened on the snow. Her tired sons at once lay down behind her. The sled slid into Angus and stopped.

Mystified, Marcel called: "Marche, Fleur!

Marche!" fearing to find, when she rose, that his rock and anchor had suddenly broken on the trail.

But the great dog, ignoring the command, raised her nose in a low growl as Marcel reached her.

"What troubles you, Fleur?" he asked, on his knees beside her, brushing the crusted snow from her ears and slant eyes. Again Fleur whined mysteriously.

"Where ees de pain, Fleur? Get up!" he ordered sharply, thinking to learn where her iron body had received its hurt. But the dog lay rigid, her throat still rumbling.

"By Gar, dis ees queer t'ing!" muttered Marcel, his mittened hand on the massive head.

Then some strange impulse led him to advance into the black wall, when, with fierce protest, Fleur, jerking Jules to his feet, leaped forward, straining to reach him.

The Frenchman, checked by the dog's action, stared into the darkness, until, at length, he saw that the white tundra at his feet fell away before his snow-shoes and he looked out into gray space.

As he crouched peering ahead, his senses slowly warned him that he stood on a shoulder of cliff falling sheer to the invisible beach below.

He had driven his dogs to the lip of a ghastly death; and Julie ——

Turning back, he flung himself beside the trembling Fleur and with his arm circling the great neck, kissed the battered nose. Fleur, with the uncanny instinct of the born lead-dog, had scented the open space, divined the danger, had known—and lain down, saving them all.

Swinging his team off the brow of the cliff, he worked back and finally down to the beach, and his muffled passenger, drowsy, with swiftly numbing limbs, never knew that he had ridden calmly, that night, out to the doors of doom.

In the lee of an island Marcel made camp and boiled life-giving tea,—the panacea of the north—and pemmican, on a hot fire, which soon revived the frozen Hunter.

To his joy, he realized that the back of the blizzard was broken, for as the wind and snow eased, the temperature rapidly fell to an Arctic cold. With Whale River eighty miles away; his dogs broken by lack of rest and stiff from the wrenching and exhaustion of the battle with the deep snow; his own legs twinging with "mal raquette"; Marcel thanked God, for the dawn would see the wind dead and if his team did not fail him, in two days he would reach the post.

CHAPTER XL

"HE'S GOT HIS MAN!"

WHALE RIVER was astir. Before the trade-house groups of Crees critically inspected the dogs of Baptiste Laval, who fretted and yelped, eagerly waiting the "*Marche!*" which would send them off on the river trail. Inside, the grave-faced Gillies gave big Jules his parting instructions.

"He never started home in that blizzard, Jules; McKenzie wouldn't allow the missionary to take such a chance. But Jean surely left yesterday morning and with fresh dogs he'll come through in four days, even with a heavy trail. You ought to meet him this side the Cape."

"Yes, M'sieu. But I t'ink he travel more fas' dan dat. I see heem to-morrow, maybe."

"No, he never started that last day of the blow. It would have been suicide. Poor lad! he must have been half crazy, with her on his mind."

"How ees she dis noon, M'sieu?"

"The fever holds about the same—no worse; but she must be operated on very soon. The poison is extending. If you meet them at the Cape you ought to get the doctor here a day ahead of Jean, with his tired dogs.”

Surrounded by the Crees who were wishing them luck on their trip to meet and relay Marcel home, Baptiste had cracked his dog-whip with a loud, “*Marche!*” when an Indian with arms raised to attract attention came running from the shore across the clearing.

“Whoa!” shouted Jules, and Baptiste checked his dogs.

“What does he say?” called Angus McCain. “A dog-team down river? Do you hear that, Gillies?”

“Husky,” replied the factor drily. “Couldn’t possibly be Marcel!”

“No, he couldn’t have come through that norther,” agreed McCain.

“What’s that he says, Jules?” demanded Gillies.

Jules Duroc, hands and shoulders in motion, was talking excitedly to the Cree who had joined the group by the sled. Turning suddenly, he ran back to the factor.

“Felix say dat a team crawl up de riviere trail lak’ dey ver’ tired. He watch dem long tam.”

“That’s queer, but it’s some Husky—can’t be Marcel. Why, good Lord, man! he hasn’t been away six days.”

Angus disappeared, to return with an old brass-bound telescope and hurried to the river shore with

Jules, followed by the scoffing Gillies. To the naked eye, a black spot was discernible on the river ice.

"There are two men following a team," announced Angus, the glass at his eye. "They're barely moving. Now they've stopped; the dogs must be played out. The driver's trying to get them up! Now he's got them going!"

Gillies took the telescope and looked for a long space. Suddenly to those who watched him, waiting for his report, his hand visibly shook. Turning to Jules, he bellowed:

"Jules, you travel like all hell for that dog-team! God only knows how they got here alive, but there's only one lead-dog on this coast that reaches to a man's middle. That team crawling in out there is Jean Marcel's—God bless him!—*and he's got his man!*"

With a roar Jules leaped on the sled and lashed the team headlong down the cliff trail to the ice. Madly they raced down-river under the spur of the rawhide goad.

"Run to the Mission, someone, and tell Père Breton that Jean Marcel is back!" continued Gillies. At the words, willing feet started with the message.

The eyes of Colin Gillies were blurred as he watched through the glass the slow approach of those who had but lately fought free from the maw of the pitiless snows. Now he could recognize the massive lead-dog, limping at a slow walk, her great head down. Behind her swayed the crippled whelps of the wolf, tails brushing the ice, tongues lolling as they swung their lowered heads from side to side, battling through the last mile on stiffened legs, giving their last ounce at the call of their gaunt master who reeled behind them. Far in the rear a tall figure barely moved along the trail.

At the yelp of Jules' approaching team the dogs of Marcel pricked drooping ears. Stopping them, Jean waited for Hunter.

"Dey sen' team. Eet ees ovair, M'sieu! We mak' Whale Riviere een t'ree day and half, but she —she may not be dere."

Too tired to speak, Hunter slumped on the sled. With a yell, Jules reached Marcel and gathered him into his arms.

"By Gar, Jean! You crazee fool; you stop for noding! Tiens! I damn glad to see you, Jean Marcel!"

The fearful Marcel gasped out the question, "Julie! Ees she dere? Does she leeve?"

"Oui, mon ami; she ees alive. You save her life."

Staggering to his lead-dog the overjoyed man threw himself beside her on the trail where she sprawled panting.

"We 'ave save her," he cried. "Julie—has waited for Jean and Fleur."

Taking the missionary on his sled, Jules tried to force Marcel to ride as well, but the *voyageur* threw him off.

"No, no!" he cried. "We weel feenish on our feet—Fleur, de wolf and Jean Marcel."

So back to the post Jules raced with Hunter. A cheering mob of Indians met dogs and master on the river ice and carried Marcel, protesting, up the cliff trail, where Gillies and Angus were waiting.

"I reach For' George de night of second day, but de dreef and wind at de Cape ——" He was checked by a hug from the blubbering McCain as Colin Gillies, with eyes blurred by tears, welcomed him home.

"You have saved her, Jean," said the factor, "now you must sleep." With hands raised in wonder he turned to the group. "Shades of André Marcel! Two days to Fort George! It will never be done again." Then they took the swaying Marcel, asleep on his feet, and his dogs, away to a long, warm rest.

But the Crees sat late that night smoking much Company plug as they shook their heads over the feat of the son of André Marcel who feared neither Windigo nor blizzard. And later, the tale travelled down to the southern posts and out to Fort

Churchill on the west coast and from there on to the Great Slave and the Peace, of how the mad Marcel had driven his flying wolves one hundred and fifty miles in two sleeps, and returned, without rest, in three, in the teeth of a Hudson's Bay norther. And hearing it, old runners of the trails shook their heads in disbelief, saying it was not in dogs or men to do such a thing; but they did not know the love and despair in the heart of Jean Marcel which spurred him to his goal, nor did they fathom the blind devotion of his great lead-dog, who, with her matchless endurance and that of her sons, had made it possible.

CHAPTER XLI

AS YE SOW

FRESH from a London hospital though he was, John Hunter found that the condition of Julie Breton demanded the exercise of all his skill as a surgeon. But the operation, aided by the girl's young strength and vitality, was successful, and she slowly overcame the grip of the infection.

Four days after Marcel reeled into Whale River with his battered dogs, bringing the man who was winning back life for Julie Breton, an exhausted dog-team limped in from the south. Rushing into the trade-house the white-faced Wallace grasped Gillies' hand, hoarsely demanding:

"Does she live, Gillies?"

"She's all right, Mr. Wallace; doing well, the doctor says," answered Gillies. "She's going to pull through, thanks to Jean Marcel and Dr. Hunter. I take my hat off to those two men."

Wallace's eyes shifted to the floor as he ventured:

"When did they get in?"

"Oh, they came through against that blow in three days and a half. The greatest feat of man and dogs in my time. When did you leave East Main?"

Wallace stared incredulously at Colin Gillies' wooden face.

"East Main? Why, didn't Marcel tell you?"

"No," replied Gillies, but he did not say that his wife had been told by Hunter of the presence of Wallace at Fort George the night Marcel brought the news. However, the factor did not further embarrass his chief by questions. And Wallace did not see fit to inform him that not until the wind died, two days after the relief party started, had he left Fort George.

"I suppose she's too sick to see me?" the nervous Inspector hazarded.

"Yes, no one sees her except Mrs. Gillies and Hunter."

"Well, I'll look up Father Breton," and Wallace went out followed by an expression in Colin Gillies' face which the Inspector would not have cared to see.

For a week Wallace remained at Whale River and then, assured by Dr. Hunter of Julie's safety, left, to return later. When, meeting Marcel in the trade-house, he had attempted to thank him, the cold glitter in the eyes of the Frenchman as he listened with impassive face to the halting words of the Inspector of the East Coast, filled Colin Gillies with inward delight.

When Gillies bade good-bye to his chief, he said casually, "Well, I suppose we'll have a wedding here in June, Mr. Wallace."

"Yes, Gillies, Father Breton and I are only waiting for Julie to set the date. Good-bye; I'll be up the coast next month," and was off.

But what piqued Gillies' curiosity was whether Dr. Hunter had told Père Breton just what happened at Fort George when the tragic call for help came in on Christmas night. Jean Marcel's mouth had been shut like a sprung trap, even Jules and Angus did not know; of that, Gillies was sure. But why had the doctor not told Père Breton, as well as Mrs. Gillies? He was Julie's brother and ought to know. If Hunter had enlightened the priest, then Colin Gillies was no judge of men, for he had always admired the Oblat.

The first week in February Julie Breton was sitting up, and Mr. Hunter bade good-bye to the staunch friends he had made at Whale River. Not always are the relations between Oblat or Jesuit, and Protestant missionaries, unduly cordial in the land of their labors, but when the Reverend Hunter left the Mission House at Whale River, there remained in the hearts of Père Breton, his sister and

Jean Marcel, a love for the doctor, clergyman and man which the years did not dim.

One day, later on, Marcel and Fleur were making their afternoon call on Julie, who was propped in bed, her hair hanging in two thick braids.

"We leave in a few days," Jean said in French. "Michel is anxious to get back to his traps."

"Oh, don't go so soon, Jean. I haven't yet had an opportunity to talk to you as I wished."

"If you mean to thank me, I am glad of that," he said, his lips curling in a faint smile.

"Why should I not thank you, Jean Marcel, who risked your life like a madman to help me? I do now thank you with all my heart. But for you, I would not be here. Dr. Hunter told me I could not have lived had he arrived one day later."

With a gesture of impatience Marcel turned in his chair and gazed through the window on the world of snow.

The dark eyes in the pale face of the girl were strangely soft as they rested on the sinewy strength of the man's figure; then lifted to the strong profile, with its bony jaw and bold, aquiline nose.

"You do not care for my thanks, Jean?" she asked.

"Please!" he begged. "It is over, that! You are well again! I am happy; and will go back to my trap-lines."

"But it is not all over with Julie Breton," she insisted.

He turned with brows raised questioningly.

"It has left her—changed. She will never be the same."

"What do you mean? Dr. Hunter said you would be as strong as ever, by spring."

"Ah, but I do not speak of my body, Jean Marcel."

He gazed in perplexity at her wistful face. In a moment his eyes again sought the window.

For a long space, she was silent. Then a suppressed sob roused him from his bitter thoughts and he heard the strained voice of the girl.

"I know all," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Mrs. Gillies, and Dr. Hunter—when I asked him—told me—long ago. We have kept it from Père Henri. It seems years, for I have been thinking much since then—lying awake, thinking."

"Julie, what has been worrying you? Don't let what I did cause you pain," he pleaded, not catching the significance of her words. "It's all right, Julie. You owe me nothing—I understand."

"Ah, but you do not understand," she said, smiling at the man's averted face.

"Julie, I have suffered, but I want you to be happy. Don't think of Jean Marcel."

"But it is of Jean Marcel of the great heart that I must think—have been thinking, for days and days." She was sitting erect, tense; her pale face drawn with emotion.

"I tell you I know it all," she cried, "how they —*he*, feared to start in the storm—and waited—ordered you to wait. But no wind or snow could hold Jean Marcel, and in spite of them, he brought Dr. Hunter to Whale River—and saved Julie Breton."

Dumb with surprise at her knowledge of what he thought he and Hunter alone knew—at the scorn in her voice, Marcel listened with pounding heart.

"Yes, they told me," she went on, "how Jean Marcel heard the news when he reached Whale River and, without sleep, that night hurried south for help, swifter than men had ever travelled, because Julie Breton was in peril. Dr. Hunter has told me all; how you and Fleur fought wind and snow to bring him to Whale River—and Julie Breton. And now you ask her not to thank you—you who gave her back her life."

Only the low sobbing of the girl broke the silence. In a moment the paroxysm passed, and she looked through tears at the man who sat with bowed head in hands, as she faltered:

"Ah, will you not see—not understand? Must I tell you—that I—love—Jean Marcel?"

Dazed, Jean rose. With a hoarse cry of "Julie!" he groped to the bed and took her in his yearning arms.

After the years—she had come home.

Later, Mrs. Gillies looked in to see a dusky head on the shoulder of the man who knelt by the bed, and on the coverlet beside them the great head of Fleur, who gazed up into two illumined faces through narrow eyes which seemed to comprehend as her bushy tail slowly swept to and fro.

* * * * * * *

In June there was a wedding at Whale River, with an honored guest who journeyed up the coast from Fort George for the ceremony, John Hunter.

The Mission church overflowed with post people and the visiting Crees, few of whom but had known some kindness from Julie Breton. In the robes of his order, Père Breton faced the bride and groom. Beside the former, gravely stood the matron of honor; her gown of slate-gray and snowy white, carefully groomed for the occasion by the faithful Jules, glossy with superb vitality; her great neck circled by a white ribbon knotted in a bow—which it had required days to accustom her to wear—in strange contrast to the massive dignity of the head. From priest to bride and groom, curiously her slant eyes shifted, in wonder at the proceeding.

The ceremony over, the bride impulsively kissed the slate-gray head of the dog while a hum of approval swept the church. Then, before repairing with their friends to the Mission House, where the groaning table awaited them, Julie and Jean Marcel, accompanied by Fleur, went to the stockade. Three gray noses thrust through the pickets whined a welcome. Three gigantic, wolfish huskies met them at the gate with wild yelps and the mad swishing of tails. Then the happy Jean and Julie gave the whelps of the wolf their share of the wedding feast.

If you like this book will you not speak to your friends about it

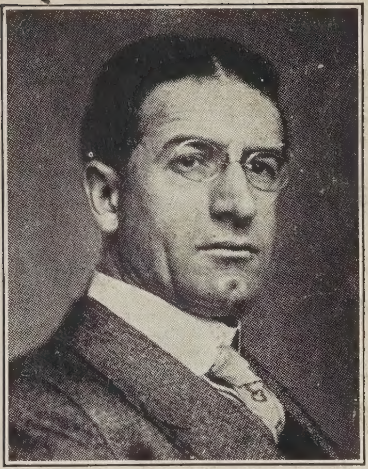
---

They like good books and are glad to know about those that are worth while. Ask us to send to you and your friends our list of other books that you will probably enjoy

---

The Penn Publishing
Company Philadelphia

New Novels



THE BODY IN THE BLUE ROOM. By Sidney Williams. An intriguing mystery tale; an ingeniously tangled web of criminality. *$1.75 net.*

THEN CAME MOLLY. By Harriet V. C. Ogden. From a quaint old fashioned southern plantation comes Molly, to restless, hurrying, New York. She begins her life there as an art student, but art gives way to the great adventure. *$1.75 net.*

ALL THE WAY BY WATER. By Elizabeth Stancy Payne. A carefree cruise on Long Island Sound which developes into a romance jammed full of storms, love, and adventure. *$1.75 net.*

THE DIM LANTERN. By Temple Bailey. A tender love story done with all its well known author's delicacy of expression. *Jacket by Coles Phillips.* *$2.00 net.*

ACROSS THE MESA. By Jarvis Hall. A big breezy story of the Southwest, full of incident and thrills and with a plot and love story which will hold anyone to the end. *$1.75 net.*

UNDER THE LAW. By Edwina Stanton Babcock. A forceful story of the younger generation which shows flapperdom from a new angle. *$1.75 net.*

THE TRAIL OF CONFLICT. By Emilie Loring. A marriage of convenience of the East becomes a stirring love affair of the West. While winning a fight against great odds, Steve wins the love of his wife *$1.75 net.*

MIRANDY EXHORTS. By Dorothy Dix. These stories of old, black Aunt Mirandy will give the reader many moments of pleasure. *The illustrations are by Kemble*, whose inimitable darky pictures are known the world over. *$2.00 net.*

Ask your bookseller to let you see these books, or send to us for them

THE PENN PUBLISHING COMPANY
925-927 FILBERT ST PHILADELPHIA